

# Bandwagon

Vol. 59 No. 2 2015

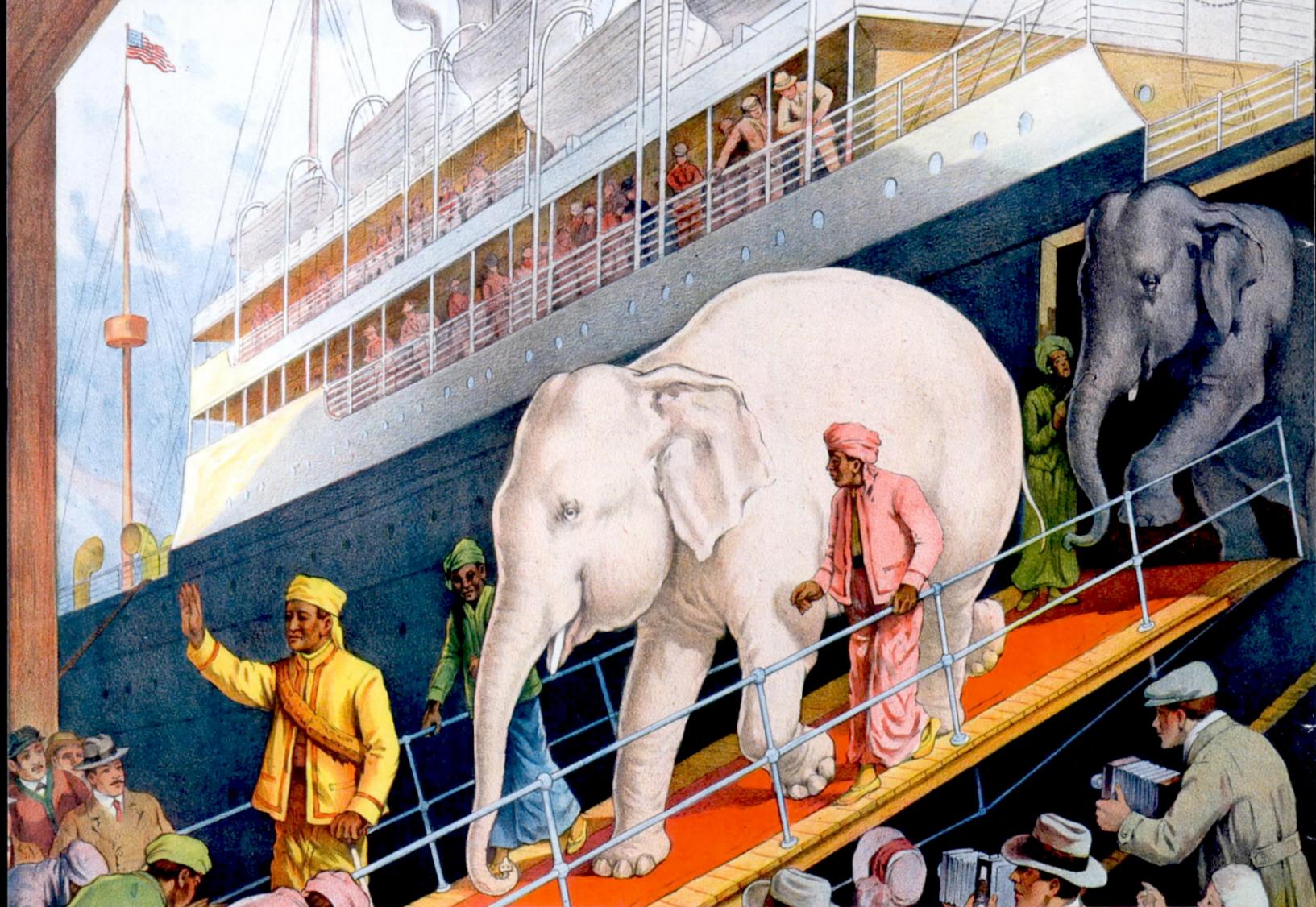


RINGLING BROTHERS AND BARNUM & BAILEY COMBINED CIRCUS.

The Journal of the Circus Historical Society

# DARRNUM & DAILEY

FIRST AND ONLY GENUINE SACRED WHITE ELEPHANT  
EVER PERMITTED TO LEAVE HIS NATIVE LAND"



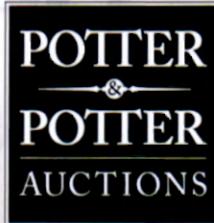
PUBLIC AUCTION ♦ SEPT. 19 & 20 2015 AT 10AM ♦ IN OUR CHICAGO GALLERY

## ADVERTISING, POSTERS, TOYS & COIN-OP

FEATURING OVER 100 CHOICE & RARE  
CIRCUS LOTS: LITHOGRAPHS, BROADSIDES,  
ROUTE CARDS, PHOTOGRAPHS, AND ASSOCI-  
ATED EPHEMERA.

BID ONLINE AT [www.liveauctioneers.com](http://www.liveauctioneers.com)

COLOR CATALOG \$35.00 (POST PAID)



POTTER & POTTER AUCTIONS  
3759 N. RAVENSWOOD AVE.  
-SUITE 121-  
CHICAGO, IL 60613  
PHONE: 773-472-1442  
[info@pottrauctions.com](mailto:info@potterauctions.com)  
[www.pottrauctions.com](http://www.pottrauctions.com)

## Editors

Jennifer Lemmer Posey,  
Editor  
[chsbandwagon@gmail.com](mailto:chsbandwagon@gmail.com)

Fred Dahlinger, Jr.,  
Associate Editor

Bandwagon: The Journal of the Circus Historical Society (USPS 406-390) (ISSN 0005-4968) is published by the Circus Historical Society for its members.

## Office of Publication

1075 West Fifth Avenue,  
Columbus OH 43212 with additional entry at Jefferson City MO. Periodical postage paid at Columbus OH and additional entry offices. Postmaster: send all address changes to Bandwagon: The Journal of the Circus Historical Society, 1075 Fifth Avenue, Columbus OH 43212.

## Membership Rate

Circus Historical Society membership is \$60.00 annually in the United States, \$80.00 annually in Canada, and \$105.00 annually for international members. Membership application and information are available on the CHS website at [www.circushistory.org](http://www.circushistory.org) or by contacting the Bandwagon office.

## Website and Back Issues

An index of Bandwagon articles from earlier issues is available online at [www.circushistory.org](http://www.circushistory.org). Back issues are available from the Office of Publication.

# Bandwagon

The Journal of the Circus Historical Society

2015 Volume 59, Number 2

## Table of Contents



**Note from the Editor** ..... 4

**On the Cover** ..... 5  
by Jennifer Lemmer Posey

**A 'Jebbie' at the Helm:  
Nick Weber Remembers** ..... 6  
*Nick Weber shucked clerical color  
on his tiny Royal Lichtenstein Circus*  
by Lane Talburt



**Cook Tent of a Big Circus** ..... 40  
by Cleveland Moffett



**Would You Expect to Find  
Heroes Among These Men?** ..... 48  
by Courtney Ryley Cooper



**1991-2009: Ringling's "Mini-Era"  
of the Headliner Clown** ..... 56  
by Rodney A. Huey, Ph.D.

# Circus Historical Society

[circushistory.org](http://circushistory.org)

## Mission Statement

*"To preserve, promote, and share through education the history and cultural significance of the circus and allied arts, past and present."*

## 2014 Officers

### President

Deborah W. Walk  
Sarasota, FL

### Vice President

Don Covington  
Coronado, CA

### Secretary-Treasurer

Robert Cline  
Cheraw, SC

## 2014 Board of Trustees

Chris Berry  
Scottsdale, AZ

Joe Parker  
Dallas, TX

Maureen Brunsdale  
Normal, IL

Fred D. Pfening III  
Columbus, OH

Alan Campbell  
Johns Creek, GA

John Polacsek  
Detroit, MI

Stephen T. Flint  
Janesville, WI

Al Stencell  
Toronto, ON

Stephen Gossard  
Bloomington, IL

M. Lane Talburt  
Stratford, CT

Judith L. Griffin  
Appleton, WI

Matthew Wittmann  
Denver, CO

## Trustees Emeritus

Dave Price  
Robert Sabia

Richard J. Reynolds III  
William Slout

## Notes from the Editor

Each of the articles included in this issue of *Bandwagon* explores concepts of community within the world of circus. From the hardworking razorbacks whose work raising the canvas city was celebrated by Courtney Ryley Cooper to Cleveland Moffett's explanation of the Barnum & Bailey cookhouse and how members of the show's Ethnological Congress were able to fit their traditional cuisines into their experience of the dining tent, the circus of yesterday took great pride in diversity, variety and cooperation. So does the modern circus. In sharing the story of circus performer and educator Nick Weber, Lane Talburt illuminates the significance one person can make in creating community and perpetuating the circus arts. Similarly, Rodney Huey looks at the phenomenon of the headliner clown and explores how a talented individual (or a couple of them in a row) can mark the history of the entire industry.

This common thread of community and the individual's role seems particularly timely with the Worldwide Circus Summit in the very near future (so near in fact that this will likely be in your hands after the experience). It will be a momentous occasion to see so many people, each with their own unique focus, come together to celebrate the art and industry of circus. Organizers are estimating approximately 750 attendees will experience seminars, performances, models, auctions, videos, and jackpot sessions at the Big E in Springfield, Massachusetts. It will be a wonderful celebration of all things circus.

In recognizing the importance of community, I owe big thanks to many individuals for this issue: Lane Talburt has been, as always, a joy to work with and Nick Weber and Carlo Pellegrini have been equally supportive and helpful in every possible way. Preparing the article on Nick gave me the opportunity to reach out to a few others for images—Paul Gutheil and Clay Walker were incredibly generous in allowing us to use their photos to illustrate the article and both Beth Swift at Wabash College and Krystal Thomas at Florida State University were very kind in facilitating the use of images from the respective collections. The variety of sources used to illustrate the article really shows the broad swath of people and schools impacted by Nick and his Royal Lichtenstein Circus.

Rodney Huey, just back from travels to Ethiopia and Holland, quickly returned his manuscript in time to allow me to run it in this issue. It is a wonderful addition, bringing a special history up to this millennium. The two historic articles by Moffett and Ryley Cooper were brought to my attention by Fred Pfening III, whose support and broad knowledge of resources past and present have been so important to me as I have taken on the task of editing *Bandwagon*.

The production of this issue owes special thanks to all involved as everyone really pulled together to help me as I dealt with a family crisis. For their exceptional support and professionalism I am incredibly grateful to Fred Dahlinger, John and Mardi Wells, and Deborah Walk.

JLP

## On the Cover

by Jennifer Lemmer Posey

The photographs of Edward J. Kelty are immediately recognizable to many historians of the American circus. His images are singular in their documentation of circus communities of the 1930s from the big shows like Ringling to smaller shows such as Seils-Sterling or the Tom Mix Circus. By organizing entire companies into a single shot, Kelty's photographs suggest the strength that comes from the diversity of each circus community. Individuals stand out as significant even within the large groups.

Born in Denver, Colorado on January 23, 1888, Edward J. Kelty was in the Navy prior to embarking on his career in commercial photography. Specializing in wedding and banquet photos, Kelty founded Century Flashlight Studios in New York. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s Kelty also photographed circuses that passed through his region, providing group shots and, sometimes, posed publicity images also. He traveled in a retrofitted van which accommodated onsite processing and printing, allowing Kelty to sell copies within a few hours of taking the photo. Although he stopped taking circus photos sometime around 1940, Kelty's photographs remain in high demand as souvenirs of the circus of the past.

Perhaps no single circus group photographed by Kelty was larger than the 1934 Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey full personnel shot composed of 830 people. It is difficult to imagine how on June 12, 1934 in New Haven, Con-

necticut, the photographer managed to organize so many people in time for the shutter to click. For a viewer more than 80 years later, we are swept up in the magnitude of the show and mesmerized by the search for such familiar faces. At the center of the second row sits show manager Samuel Gumpertz, surrounded by Edith Ringling and her son, Robert. Along the same row, one finds Pat Valdo, Clyde Ingalls, Fred Bradna, Dexter Fellows and Jim Whalen. One row back, Dorothy Herbert sits next to Hugo and Bruno Zacchini; Con Colleano and Ella Bradna sit beside Art and Antoinette Concello while the Wallenda Troupe squeezed in a little further down the line. Clowns Felix Adler, Paul Wenzel, Paul Horompo, Chesty Mortier, and Polidor are among the many clowns that frame the front of the shot. Also to be found among the crowd are Merle Evans, giant Jack Earle, the Doll Family, and Clicko the Dancing Bushman.

The show weathered significant challenges that year, including the change in management as John Ringling was pushed out in favor of Robert Ringling. About a month after this photograph, 77 members of the circus personnel were hospitalized in Detroit with typhoid fever. Seven would ultimately succumb to the illness. Many of those who handled food were unable to return to the show in subsequent seasons because they were potential carriers of the infection. It is likely that for many of the cookhouse department, overseen by longtime Ringling Steward A.L. Webb, the group photo Kelty shot on June 2, 1934 was the last in which they appeared with their department.



Kelty's photograph of the Ringling Cookhouse Crew, taken June 2, 1934

Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

# A 'Jebbie' at the Helm: Nick Weber Remembers



**S**t. Paul the Apostle likely would have relished the company of Nick Weber the Jesuit on his wide-ranging missionary journeys.

Though separated by two millennia in their ministries on behalf of Jesus of Nazareth, both men crisscrossed stretches of geography to spread the gospel—Paul to the Galatians, Ephesians, and Corinthians, and Nick to college students in the U.S. And the townies who gathered around them paid no admission charge, no upgrade for reserved seats.

Both men were well educated yet unsalaried, choosing to earn their keep by the sweat of their brows.

Both trained a series of apprentices to carry on their work—Timothy being one of Paul's in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century A.D. and Carlo being one of a hundred or so under Nick's wings from 1971 to 1993.

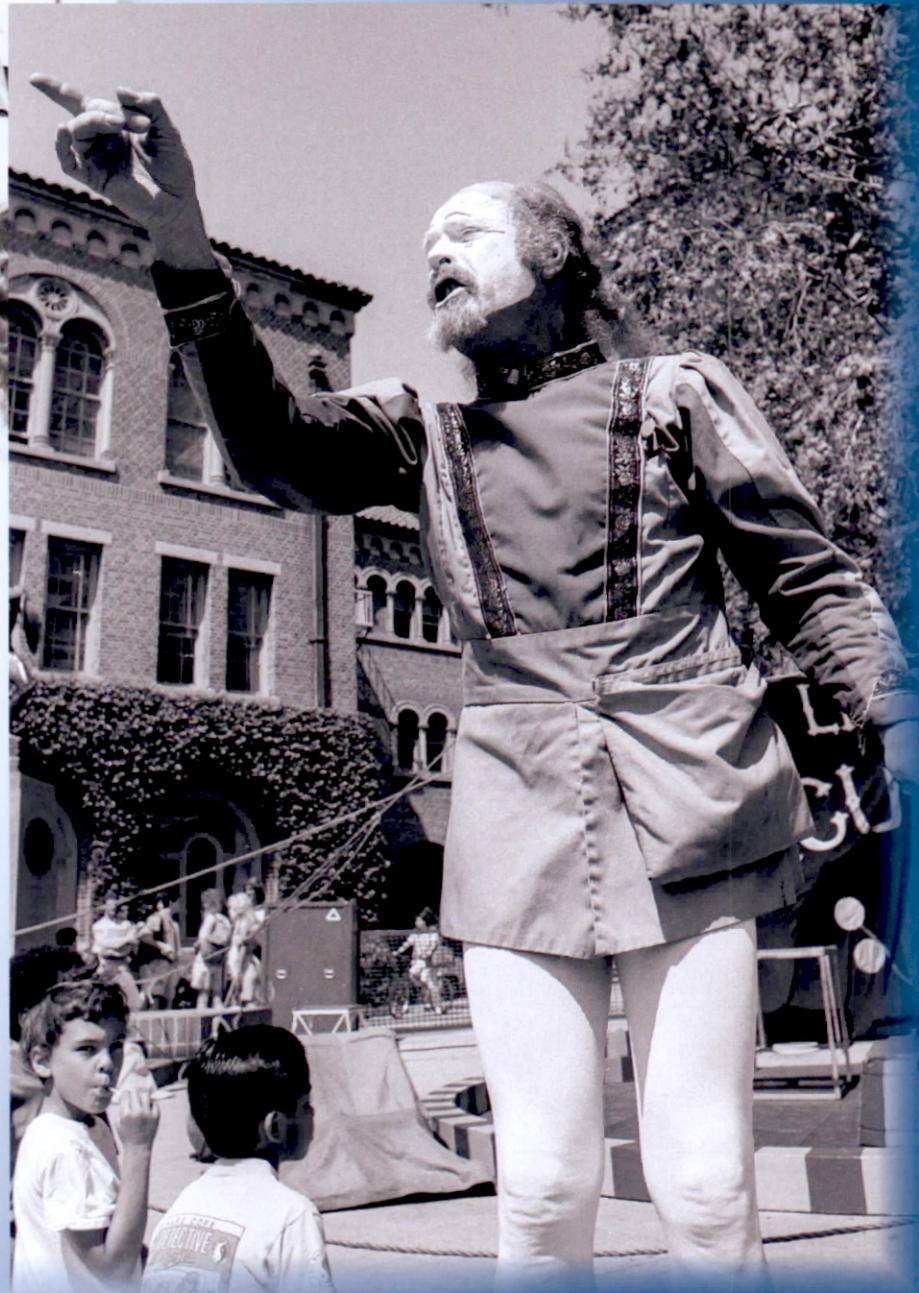
And both were considered mavericks by some of their traditional religious elders who frequently



## Nick Weber shucked clerical color on his tiny Royal Lichtenstein Circus

by Lane Talburt

*Top photo by Joyce Warden, courtesy of Robert T. Ramsay, Jr. Archival Center at Wabash College, Crawfordsville, Indiana. Two outside photos courtesy of photographer Clay Walker.*



criticized the itinerants for not being in lockstep with tradition.

But even the migrating figure of New Testament times might have found his modern-day counterpart's occupation—circus producer and clowning ringmaster—a bit disconcerting.

For one thing, Paul was widely known as a tentmaker. Weber's outfit used only a sidewall, a single piece of canvas stretched between two poles to serve as a backdrop.

For another, Weber's style of outreach through his Royal Lichtenstein Circus was much more laid back. He wore no clerical collar and disguised his homilies in "morality tales." "We invented a way to incorporate morality plays inside the circus," Weber said. These, in turn, were inserted into an hour-long performance filled with poetry, not piety, and with frivolity, not formality.

By the Royal Lichtenstein founder's intent, the show consistently spotlighted God's furred

and feathered creatures—dogs, goats, miniature horses, ducks, macaws, and, yes, even bears.

Its human troupers, numbering as few as two and as many as nine during the far-ranging tours, were youth either just out of high school or who wished to take a year off from their collegiate studies.

In exchange for volunteering their time and services for a season, Weber agreed to equip his new partners with training in circus skills—juggling, trapeze, magic illusions, and diabolo, to name a few. One of his performing acolytes, Carlo Pellegrini, explains in the accompanying sidebar story how his participation in the initial nationwide tour in 1972 influenced his later professional circus career and led to his founding of Amazing Grace Circus!, a not-for-profit youth circus in Nyack, New York.

In short, the circus's physical footprint was tiny—it could easily be squeezed onto a patio in front of a college student activities building, or even its lobby, but its moral

appeal was larger than life. That it bridged the entertainment and spiritual domains for 22 years can be attributed to Weber's immersion in the circus and theater arts and to his 13 years of intense training as a theologian that led to his ordination as a Catholic priest, carrying the initials "S.J."—Society of Jesus after his name. (The Jesuits frequently referred to themselves as "Jebbies.")

But, Weber said, "The circus was at work in me and religious consciousness was at work in me and long before I ever heard the word Jesuit."

During a speech in 2012 to circus fans in Connecticut, Weber shared his memories of visiting his first circus near his hometown of Yuba City, California, just two months after the internationally publicized Hartford circus fire which claimed 167 lives.

"And I'm a little slow, but just last year, I figured out why, when they sent me (Nick was then 5 years old) across the river to Marysville, California, to see Cole Bros. Circus



Weber performs with two miniature horses.

courtesy of Nick Weber

in August of '44, they were telling me, 'If there's a fire, go under the seats and out the side of the tent.' I never recovered. I remember three things: the firehouse gag, tripping over a rope as I left the lot, and that one of the sidewalls of the tent was red and white striped. But more than anything, I remember my mother telling me that this immense canvas city and everything I had just experienced would not be there in the morning. It would be off to Oroville or Fresno or some other town. That was magic. That stuck with me. This did not belong to us. It belonged to everyone."

While in Connecticut, Weber visited the site of one of his performances, Fairfield University, a Jesuit school. His special tour guide, Bruce Hawley, is an alumnus of the Jesuit university and a former CHS vice president and board member. As the pair stood in front of the student union building, Hawley attempted to prompt Weber. It wasn't necessary, as documented on video by the author:

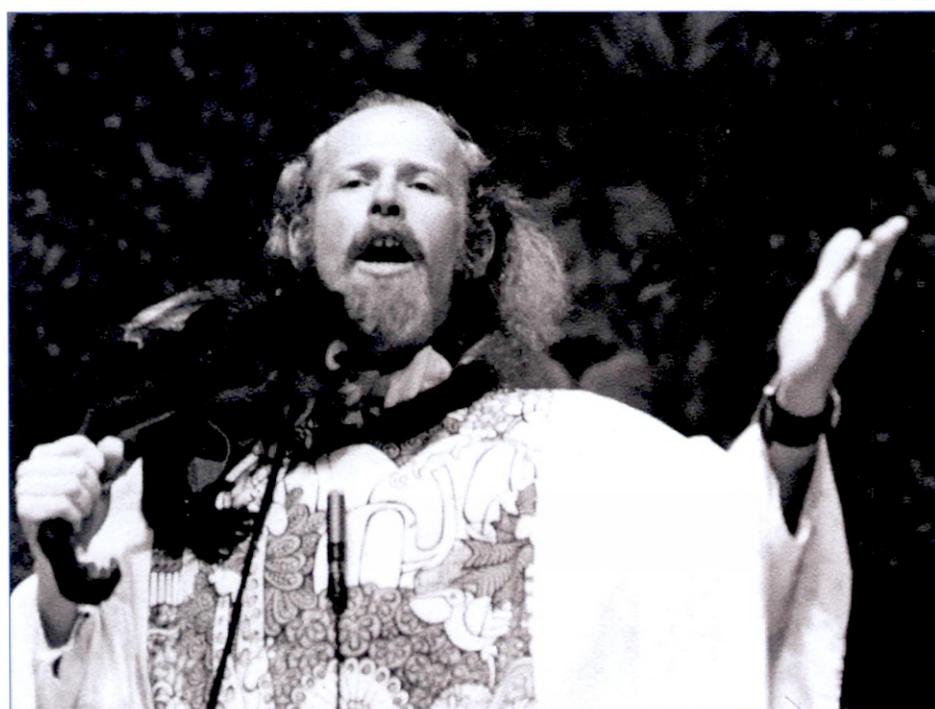
**Hawley:** This is the place where I saw the Royal Lichtenstein Quarter-Ring Sidewalk Circus for the first time in the 1980s. And I'm hoping this brings back some memories of the time you were here at Fairfield U.

**Weber:** It does. I can remember that we were set up right here...But I did something here, even though this was about the tenth year out that you saw in the show for the first time. I did something right here that night for the first time. We had a trained domestic cat act—three tabbies, house cats named Gunther, Gebel, and Williams, after the great Ringling superstar animal presenter. Well, I made the mistake after the first year out with those cats of giving them the summer off when we trained. And they found out they didn't have to work—the bottle walk, jumping through hoops, going "to seat"—the standard command for an animal to get to its home base in the ring, and all that. And as a result of that, we only had one cat, Gebel, who would work. And she was the one who jumped through fire. About half way through the season, she stopped going back through the hoop. She would only jump this way through the hoop. We couldn't get her: fresh chicken liver, nothing would get her back. So I developed a line for my partner, who was

holding the hoop. I usually found somebody near the ring, a good-looking guy. And I would say, 'It's no use, Mitch [Kincannon], she won't jump this way.' And finally, 'Why?' 'Because this guy's too ugly.' And it always got a laugh. That night, here in Fairfield I decided to do something different. There was a very attractive girl, casually dressed, really having a good time, looked like she was with it. And I said, 'I'm going to change it tonight. 'It's no use, Mitch, she won't come this way.' 'Why?' 'Because this girl is too ugly.' Oh my God. Immediate registration of failure. She didn't even take time to blush before she flipped me off and left the show. Oh, that was a big, big lesson for me. From then on, the guys had to bear the brunt of the joke. And, we weren't completely unsuccessful. After all, we're back, OK? You and I are visiting. But we also got a graduate from here, Keith Hughes, who's still in the area. He joined us for a year (on the 1984-85 national tour) and shocked his parents, I think, by writing on his mortar board for graduation, 'Mom, I'm joining the circus.' So that's what I remember so very well from this location."

In fact, the Royal Lichtenstein Circus did pick up some of its cast members who fell under the spell of the show that was geared to their generation's concerns and foibles.

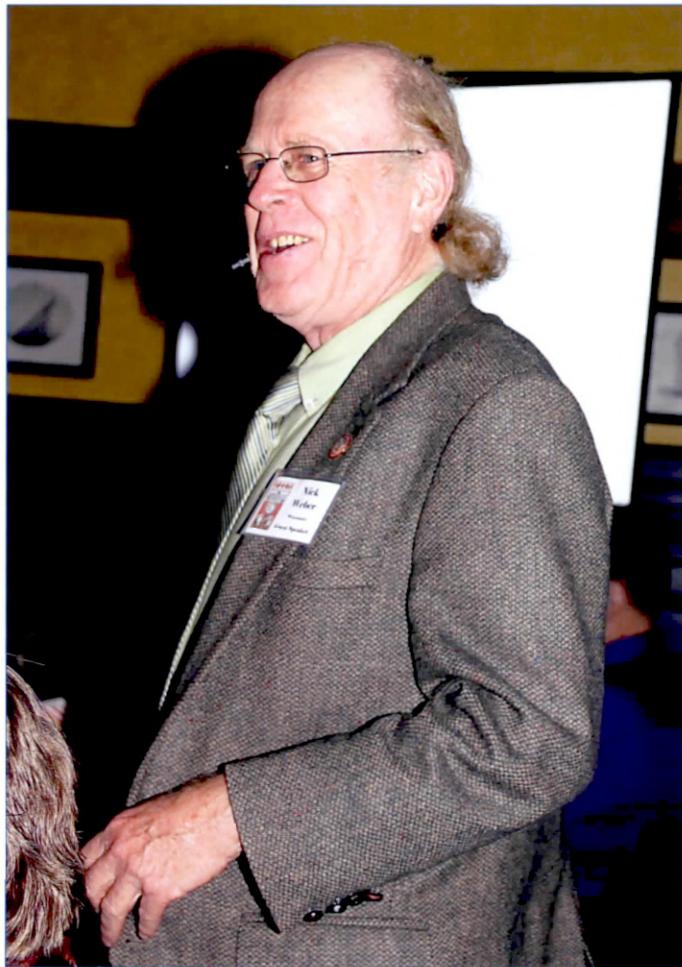
To understand why and how Weber was drawn to that magical band called circus requires a brief look at his up-



*Weber in his vestments, holds a small friend.*

courtesy of Nick Weber

bringing and the politically and spiritually changing environment in which he was educated during the 1960s and '70s. Student-led protests against the Vietnam War accompanied radical changes in the Catholic Church brought about by Vatican II. Weber spelled out these influences in greater detail in a memoir, *The Circus that Ran Away with a Jesuit Priest* which he sold and signed at the June, 2012 Circus Historical Society convention in Baraboo, Wisconsin. At that time he shared some of his experiences in an interview with Lane Talburt. The two continued their dialog in an interview at Talburt's home in Stratford, Connecticut,



Nick Weber at the 2013 CFA banquet

photo by Janet Sopelak

that October.

The edited transcript of the interviews follows:

**Weber:** I'm Nick Weber. I'm retired now, living in Milwaukee and I've had time to digest a lot of memories and write them up in a memoir called *The Circus that Ran Away with the Jesuit Priest, Memoir of a Delible Character*. And the subtitle is a takeoff on the premise that we were taught

from the time we were first graders in the Baltimore Catechism that certain sacraments transmitted an indelible character to the soul. But the book is basically about my vocation as a Jesuit priest in which I was called to fashion a ministry out of the circus and then found my way out of the circus and out of the Jesuits into another kind of life.

In 1944 my parents took me to Cole Bros. Circus. I was five years old. I never recovered. It was really the first passion in my life. And the second biggest passion in my life was in meeting God. My father's father was solicitous about my religious education. And so church and everything connected with it also became very graphic passions in my life. So both of those influences were there from childhood, early childhood. And I played at circus and I played at priest in my grandmother's backyard. Circus was at work in me and religious consciousness was at work in me long before I ever heard the word Jesuit. I was raised and trained by diocesan priests in my hometown in Northern California. And by the time I was ready to go to high school there was a decision made that I really needed to go someplace where I could continue an education in a way that would respond to my religious sensitivity. And lo and behold I was shipped to San Jose, California, Bellarmine College Prep: the Jesuits. And as a resident student I lived with the Jesuits, and I fell in love with this religious family. And when I graduated from high school I entered the order. And I went through the traditional years of training before ordination. I never, ever dreamed that I would be other than a conventional Jesuit teacher, because that's what Jesuits meant to me.

**Q:** Jesuits were/are fairly strict right down the line, weren't they?

**Weber:** Yes, it's a very, almost militaristic order by caricature. Not so in reality. I think more than anything they are renaissance men dedicated to their founder's marvelous insight from his spiritual exercises that we should find God in all things. And of all things, I managed to find God in the circus. I found the circus a holy place when I began to really experience it and become aware of what I was experiencing as I went to the circus. I remember attending a Hanneford show many years ago in which there was a living statues act, a very fine living statues act. And an Episcopal chaplain for Ringling Bros. circus was sitting in front of me. And at the end of the act he turned around to me and he said, "I feel like I've been to church." And I said, "You have been to church." And I fully believe that. I believe the circus can be a very sacred event.

**Q:** Did you continue seeing circuses while you were in seminary?

**Weber:** Oh, I saw few circuses when I was training as a Jesuit. The Jesuit in training is not like a seminarian outside of a religious order. Your Jesuit life becomes your whole life. So it's not like you're home for the summer or have a lot of free time on your hands. But when I was in Spokane, Washington, at Gonzaga U. doing my philosophical studies, word reached me that Ringling was coming to town. They were going to be playing the Spokane Coliseum. And I knew my idol, Lou Jacobs, was on that show, and I had never met him. So I asked permission to meet him. And the very strange distinction was made by the rector of the community. "Well, I can allow you to go meet the gentleman, but by the Rules for Scholastics"—we seminarians were called scholastics—"we can't give you permission to see the show." Well, as luck would have it, Lou maybe sensed this, I don't know, but he left a note for me at the box office: "Yes, we can meet any day you want at intermission." Well, I didn't know when intermission for a given show was, so I had to arrive and wait. And so I did. Lou didn't know I was in a Roman collar. And how to get in? Well, I had another seminarian with me, a Jesuit, and we walked in the back door. The elephants were lined up for spec and we walked right by them, looking like we knew what we were doing, and saw spec and then were directed to clown alley, which, as you know, I'm sure, is one end of the men's dressing room in the arenas. And there I was in front of him; Lou had removed that cone head prosthetic, and we chatted.

**Q:** And what year was this?

**Weber:** It would have been the 1960s. I went to Spokane in '61, so it was probably '62, '63, right in there. And I remember that very dramatically. The other thing I remember in that time was returning to my room one morning after breakfast, and a classmate said, "Do you know of a famous wire-walking family?" And I said, "Yes." And that was the morning after the fall in Detroit (of the Great Wallendas seven-person pyramid). The pyramid had collapsed.

**Q:** The Wallendas.

**Weber:** Yes, it was the Wallendas, and I had seen that pyramid done when I was a boy in Sacramento. My aunt had won a bet: I could not believe you could have a circus in a building. And she took me to the Shrine Circus—it was Polack West in Sacramento, and that's where I first saw the Wallendas. I cannot remember where I was when I heard

that John F. Kennedy was shot. But I can remember where I was, graphically, when I heard about that fall in Detroit.

**Q:** By the way, when and where were you born?

**Weber:** I was born in September, 1939 in Yuba City, California. There's a gas station on that corner now.

**Q:** Where was the Jesuit school where you got your training?

**Weber:** When I entered the Jesuits, I was 17 years old. And I went to a seminary—it was called a novitiate—the



A Royal Lichtenstein Circus performer

photo courtesy  
of Robert T. Ramsay, Jr. Archival Center  
at Wabash College; Crawfordsville, Indiana

first two years south of San Jose, California—Los Gatos. At the time besides spiritual training we also were getting a certain amount of Latin—I already had four years of it and two years of Greek but more and more and more. All of our academic credits at that time from Los Gatos would go into Santa Clara University, which was just a number of miles away. And so, in one sense, I'm an alum of Santa

Clara University, but we weren't on campus; we were on the side of a hill for four years then. I was there from 1957 to 1961. Then they moved us for philosophy up to Spokane, Washington, and again we were on the side of a hill and our transcripts were going to Gonzaga University. And then I taught for three years after that. That was the usual thing, two years as an initiate, two years of classical studies, three years philosophy, and three years of teaching, then three years of theology, and those transcripts again went through Santa Clara University, so you wound up with a masters in sacred theology out of Santa Clara University. And then I began to think I could do something by that time different with theater. Now we've jumped, but that's the schedule that I followed.

**Q:** Before we leave that period, the Church was going through quite a change in the whole time you were in the seminary, wasn't it?

**Weber:** Right. Vatican II. Pope John XXIII, who they thought wasn't going to last very long, called that second Vatican council, and he purposefully called it in order to bring the Church up to date. In Italian he called it a "jolly memento." And that's what was going on at the time. And there was a self-conscious search for how to make the dynamics of your faith more accessible to the people. And the liturgy was changing into the vernacular everywhere, you know—no more Latin in the priest's novitiate to the people and all that. So we were in a very alive time. We were on fire looking for new forums.

**Q:** It seems to me during that time—I remember being at Southwestern Bell Telephone in P.R. in '64 in Dallas, and there was a P.R. guy in Lubbock, Texas, who was appalled that they were actually dropping Latin at mass, and he was ready for a worldwide revolt in the church. So there were really a few things going on at the time you were in the seminary.

**Weber:** There was. And they were marvelous comebacks for the flock, one of the most humorous having to do with the use of vernacular English in our case in the mass was: We used to say, "Well, no matter where you are all over the world, the mass sounds the same." And the counter was: "Yes, isn't it wonderful. All over the world, no matter where you are, you can't understand what's being said at mass." And it was very true, you know. So now, of course, we are experiencing a reaction to Vatican II by the people who feel they lost their cause when the changes came in. And it is, in some respects that Vatican II never happened. And there

recently has been a change, you may know, back to some more stilted translations of the mass, and the people are so comfortable with the vernacular that they had right after the council that they're having a real difficulty going back to the nebulous, technical tones used in the translation that the top authorities want used in the vernacular. So, it's political.

**Q:** Back to the mission at hand. What prompted your immersion in theater roles?

**Weber:** In 1967 I started theology south of San Jose, again a seminary that was removed from ordinary college campus life, but our transcripts were going to Santa Clara University. And we were beginning the masters in sacred theology at that time. At the end of three years we would be ordained. Well, I had taught and I had directed theater and I had been successful, and I couldn't leave that behind. And so as a theology student I began a traveling theater company in the San Jose area. We did conventional scripts, and then we would hold talkbacks with the audience to discuss the values that we had just dramatized in the production. And then, lo and behold, the seminary was moved to the north side of the U.C. Berkeley campus. That had been something in the works for years, and finally we got around to moving: lock, stock, and barrel, we were right in the middle of college campus life in Berkeley. It was amazing. Well, Sproul Plaza was alive with preachers and pupeteers. Across the bay in San Francisco, the mime troupe was teaching us how to do theater that wasn't very precious. It was on the street, in the parks, accessible. And here I was in the summertime working on another masters in drama at San Francisco State.

**Q:** And the Pickle Family Circus was active.

**Weber:** Exactly. The Pickle Family Circus was happening. And so, I mean it was really a melting pot of new ideas about how to do old forms: in the Church, outside the Church, in the theater and so forth. In politics even. And so I began to think ever since I was a little boy I taught myself balancing, fire eating, magic. And I thought, "I can do stuff that looks like a circus and use it as the sandwiching around short morality tales: the value of kindness, the value of telling the truth, the value of honesty. I can make these little morality tales appearing anywhere—sidewalks, parks, shopping centers—by surrounding it with the trappings of circus. So I'm discussing this with one of the mimes who performed with us in the park in my company. And we're talking about a little tiny show that can fit anywhere—little

tiny show. And, but we've got to let the public know that there's more here than meets the eye, and so it's got to have a big sounding name to describe a little tiny show. And right off the bat, he said, "Yes. Something like the Royal Lichtenstein Circus and Traveling Taxidermy Show." Well, the traveling taxidermy sounded like a rock group. And besides I wanted live animals if my name is going to be connected with the circus. So I nixed all that, and we became the Royal Lichtenstein Circus. I kidnapped one of my theater students from a high school I had been teaching at and another fellow, and we went out for one summer. Provincial found me a car, stationed me at Santa Clara University, where the Jesuit community took me in, gave me housing, gave me food for a couple of weeks of rehearsal, and off we went. And when we came home from that first summer with the Royal Lichtenstein, we didn't know what we were doing, except messing with a new form that we loved. And we did—the Vietnam War was in high gear, then. We did an anti-war piece, mime, very short, about a young soldier going off to war and all gung ho about his uniform and his rifle and his helmet, and then after he bayonets his first victim, realizes what a life is. And you can visually see him

change. We put that in a middle of a circus.

**Q:** It was something of the liberal theology.

**Weber:** (laughs) Oh yes, it was quite liberal. *Time* magazine described it as an amiable blend of circus, tricks and low-key morality play.

**Q:** Tell me the format and the types of personalities that went into it.

**Weber:** Well it changed, of course. We got better and better. The first summer—at the end of the first summer when we came home to Santa Clara, lo and behold the Jesuit Artist Institute, which doesn't exist anymore, was having their meeting at Santa Clara University. So the entire network of Jesuit artists saw us. And the next summer we had three Jesuits who are now priests still in the show—they were scholastics at the time, training. And one of them was a very fine mime and a very good juggler. He taught me to juggle. He's now an award-winning playwright, Bill Cain from New York. But as more people, different people came in every year, new skills came in. I learned the new stuff. So it was always an amalgam of very fast, sideshow talker



The Royal Lichtenstein Circus troupe in Los Angeles, circa 1989

photo courtesy of photographer Clay Walker

material, sometimes three different spiels being done at the same time. Because I had memorized the carnival talkers as a boy. And I felt this was part and parcel of the whole thing. And then there would be a skill act. It could be juggling. It could be some kind of balancing. Then magic. Then maybe a dog. Then other skills. Eventually the skills would be unicycles, devil's sticks, diabolo—really complicated unicycle stuff, up and down the steps, jumping rope, giraffe unicycles, through the slalom backwards and forwards. Trampoline work. Eventually a single trapeze. About four years out I taught myself the wire. And so we had a wire act. It was a self-standing rig that could be set up anywhere seven feet off the floor. I ate fire every show somewhere toward the end. And then a menagerie developed. We had monkeys, bears, horses, goats—pigmy goats, parrots, all kinds of dogs, of course. And then eventually the music got bigger. At the beginning we had just a little crank organ. At the

very beginning we just had a ukulele and a recorder. And then a crank organ, a hand crank organ that I bought from Frankfurt—had it imported, and then a big Calliola from Stinson Organ Works in Bellefontaine, Ohio. And as the music got richer and fuller, we performed better. We met our music, and it pulled stuff out of us we didn't even know we had. Club juggling, club passing became very sophisticated with pyramids and stackups and all that.

**Q:** Give me a time frame here. When did you start and how long did you stay on the road?

**Weber:** We started in the summer of 1971, and we turned it around in July of '93 and headed it home to Florida for the last time. The reason we went down to Florida at the time is that there was a zoo there where we had befriended the vet who owned it. And we knew he had a home for the animals.

**Q:** I take it, then, as a circus producer you did not necessarily retire rich.

**Weber:** No. I never made an honest dime in my life. (laughs) I was a religious from the time I was 17 in the Roman Catholic Church, and I, as a result, did not earn any income. I had no Social Security even, no Social Security card until I was a Jesuit priest and the order got a Social Security number for us. Because I never had a job that required one. I didn't pay taxes. Then the circus was a 501(c) (3). We only charged what it cost us to keep the show moving. No one made a salary on the show. I always told the kids, get this trick and you'll double my salary and yours. Because two times zero is zero.

**Q:** So you never made a payroll on that circus.

**Weber:** No. No we never did. Everybody volunteered. They were trained in whatever skills the show needed and they were willing to learn for seven weeks in the summer. In the beginning it was two weeks, and then we increased that. In the summer when we were rehearsing and preparing the new show, the Jesuit community I was attached to absorbed the cost of these folks and me living and eating there. So that's how we existed. Without that, there would have been none.

**Q:** So this was a circus of faith, for you, as much as anything else.

**Weber:** Yes, it was, it was a ministry. And we ran it that way, and my partners knew it. We charged a flat fee from the sponsors, whether they were the principal's office of an



*Kevin Curdt on the trapeze, circa 1989*

photo courtesy of photographer Clay Walker

elementary school, the activities' office on a college campus, shopping center public relations director, or whatever.

**Q:** What were the ranges of these fees?

**Weber:** It would be \$300 to \$500 or \$600. That's all. And they got a lot (for the money), especially as the show matured over the years, they got a lot of extremely skilled entertainment.

**Q:** And so you had no money from what you were doing to pour back into the show itself, eh?

**Weber:** We saved. We did have a bit of a bank account by the end of the season so that we could refurbish the engines of the vehicles and make it through the summer buying feed and, you know, elemental new props and refurbishing, painting and so forth. So we weren't broke when we went home, but we didn't have a huge capital at all. Some places would allow us, besides our fee, to set out our hat at the end. And so that money—hard currency, coin and paper—went into a bank bag next to the driver's seat in one of the trucks. And everybody knew that was available for whatever incidental you needed. If you were going to movie or you needed new toothpaste or something like that, you could help yourself. It was just sitting there.

We used to go from Mississippi down to New Orleans. And the first night in New Orleans of what was usually a several-day run, everybody was obliged to have dinner with the ringmaster—me—on his account in the French Quarter so they could sample that marvelous cuisine, and that same night they had to go to at least one set with the ringmaster on the show's dime at Preservation Hall. Preservation Hall in New Orleans and Circus World Museum in Baraboo are two of the places I make pilgrimages to. So one night—they all stayed for two or three sets, of course, at Preservation Hall—we were walking back to where I parked the truck.

And suddenly one of the troupers jumped up in the air, swore—I think, and started running toward the truck. And then I saw there was a crowd around the back end of our truck. I had mistakenly parked in a police-only parking zone right across from the precinct in or near the Quarter. And what we pieced out, in the days that followed, was that the shift had changed at the precinct and the police came over to get their cars, and they saw this white van, which happened to resemble the same van pimps in the Quarter used for sexual privacy. But not only that, that remarkable vehicle was rocking.

Well, they called vice [police] right away. And then they opened the truck and, sure enough, there was the bear pac-

ing back and forth. As we approached I hear my dog barking. They've got the animal control people running around playing Tarzan for the night. And they took my little dog, Jingles, and put her in another truck, and she was barking her head off. And there were all these people around. "Is this your truck?" And I said, "Yes." "Uh, what is this?" And I said, "Well, it should be obvious from the striping on the top, the ring curbs, that it's a circus. "Well, you've got animals, and there's no air in there!" And I said, "I know, and I misjudged on the humidity. We just came in here and we're not used to this humidity. The truck is bound for Loyola University here in New Orleans and as soon as we're hooked up, you'll notice there's an air conditioner up there and the animals will have air." "Well, there's no water."

I said, "Right. Bears tend to make a mess when there's water in the cage." And of course, thank goodness they didn't try to get her out of there. There she was. This was no



*RLC jugglers in Los Angeles, circa 1989*

photo courtesy of photographer Clay Walker

circus audience. She was going back and forth, just looking at these people. They had S.P.C.A. people there. They had called them from a party. The director and his wife were in formal attire. They came over.

The bottom line was "If you want that money we found next to the driver's seat, you ought to go across the street and show I.D. and they'll give it back to you." They were counting it out on the hood of the car, how much cash was there, because they had to make a report. But that was what our people used for incidental expenses, the change at the site. That's how sophisticated our business was. So I ran across the street, they didn't ask for a stitch of I.D., they handed it over.

But in the course of those few minutes in that station there was a very large cop sitting in the corner that I heard. And he was saying, "I don't care if they have a tap-dancing giraffe over there, you guys are running around like a bunch of girls on graduation night." I could have hugged him. So that's the little bag of change, and that's the most vivid memory I have of that monetary element in our existence.

**Q:** For my education, how did Brent Dewitt (Cheeko the Clown) fit into all this?

**Weber:** Well, Brent was on Culpepper (&) Merriweather

when one of our alums was over there—Jens Larsen, who had done Roman rings for us for two years. And Jens introduced me to Cheeko. And then years later Cheeko is based in Sarasota, and we were in Bellhaven, Florida. He came up and visited us; we were good friends. And he talked us into trying one more time—in 1993, January—to go out. And Cheeko the Clown became a very, very fine, dependable ring act. And he did at least two of his entrees—his bike act and his plate-spinning act—and then he also did the Punch and Judy. And I was concerned about whether the college kids would buy the Punch and Judy, because a lot of our audiences were college kids. And he just sold it beautifully, just beautifully...I first saw him perform with Great American. He was on Great American the same season they had "Tiptoe Through the Tulips"—Tiny Tim.

**Q:** Tell me about the vehicles you had when it started and how show grew.

**Weber:** Well, I told the Provincial when I decided that I was going to go full time into theater. At that time we didn't know it was a circus; at that time we didn't know it was going to become a circus. But I said, "I'm going to need a vehicle to get back and forth to rehearsals and so forth, and to tour. And I'm going to have to have a place to live." And he said, "I'll find you the vehicle; you find a place to live at one of the Jesuit communities. I suggest you try Santa Clara University first." And before I got to the Superior at Santa Clara University, he phoned him and said, "Take him!" (laughs) That's the kind of support I got... The Jesuits were organized not by dioceses. Although they work in them, but by province. And the boss of the province is the Provincial. He has the power over you that a bishop does. So he called up.

**Q:** So what was the name of the Provincial?

**Weber:** Pat Donahue was his name. He was the first one. He knew he was taking a risk, and he said at one point, "You know, we haven't had much luck with experimental ministries in this province, but let's try it." Again, neither one of us knew that it was going to become a circus. And the vehicle he found for me was a '67 Pontiac station wagon. And thank goodness, because it had a lot of room. And the first



Brent Dewitt as Cheeko

Sayre Collection, courtesy of the

Florida State University Libraries, Special Collections and Archives

time we went out, we had that thing loaded to the gills. I mean, doves, a duck, dogs, all of our props, music box, costumes...

**Q:** Was the name embossed on the sides?

**Weber:** No, no. You learn very quickly, very quickly, if you want to be left alone by the highway patrol, you don't let them know you're a circus. Or you'll be stopped everywhere to make sure you have papers, and you're going to be tailed, and your license plate is going to be clocked, and all that stuff. So we started with a station wagon—I knew nothing about taking care of a car. Then we had an accident and the back door was replaced, but it was of a different color; it was second hand from a junkyard. So it looked pretty crazy. And a partner of mine got into trouble back in Santa Clara and he turned the wrong way on a one-way street and got one side bashed in. So one summer when we were home, or Christmas time it was, the rector of the community at Santa Clara said, "We want to buy you a new vehicle. What would you like?" And we moved to a cube van, a little van with a box on the back of it, and I had it custom made so it had bunks for three, refrigerator, air conditioner, and so on.

And then we went to a used 2½-ton van; we added it. And that became Jumbo, and the little van became Tom

Thumb. And then when we had the band organ built, we needed more room to hold it. And we put it in a little trailer that was towed by Tom Thumb. And since they were hitched, we called the little trailer Lavinia. Well, Lavinia's maiden name was Bumpus. And one day I said, "Oh no, we don't want anybody bumping that trailer." And then after that we had a fire. Tom Thumb burnt. And then we got smart. We knew why circus people pull their living quarters and everything they need with another vehicle. So everything that goes wrong is going to go wrong with the engine, or the transmission or something. And that goes to the shop, and you can double jump back and pick up your trailer. You don't have to have bears staying overnight in a mechanic's shop and all that. So eventually we were three one-ton pickups and three 28, 30-foot Wells Fargo trailers. Again, they were all custom made.

**Q:** At this point, how did liberation theology fit into animal liberation?

**Weber:** Oh that's a great question. It didn't. You only heard about liberation theology coming up from Latin America. And frankly, guys suffering from the orthodox establishment were frightened by it, eventually suppressing it a lot. In the North, in the states, traveling with animals



Audience watches RLC at Wabash College in 1978. courtesy of Robert T. Ramsay, Jr. Archival Center at Wabash College, Crawfordsville, IN

fortunately at that time there wasn't as much sensitivity as there is now. I can only remember one violent reaction to the fact that we used contained animals, and that was the first monkey we ever got, we used to let her play on a Jungle Gym before the show. And at that one college in the West, which shall remain unnamed, a student came back and just raised Cain with us. He really was upset that we had a monkey on a leash. Now where that monkey who had never known its supposed natural environment was supposed to go and live I don't know. Kind of like the Asian elephant: where is their habitat; there isn't one unless we make one for them wherever we can have these breeding compounds. So there wasn't all that much sensitivity. You couldn't do what we did now—you couldn't do now what we did then, especially on college campuses.

**Q:** From the first time you saw circus animals, elephants, as a boy, where did you stand then and where do you stand today in terms of animals in the circus?

**Weber:** I think the circus, traditional circus. By that I mean one that smells right. The aroma of pachyderm, for instance. And horses and tigers and all of that. I think that's a paradigm that's as dramatic and as salvific as the first book of the Bible. We share this planet, and part of the sharing is with the animal kingdom. And we need to communicate with them. We need them. They need us. I think neither of us will survive if we don't communicate. I fully believe that. And so when into the ring comes an animal attempting to dance while human beings attempt to fly, we have a drama in front of us that speaks unity in creation like nothing else anywhere. So I am very committed to trained animals. Because I know the training goes both ways. And I think it's very often missed. We hear lectures about tamers. There's no such thing as tamers; we know that. You train, and they train you. They know what you expect, and they know how to get around what you expect so that you're forced to become more humane and more animal.

**Q:** Buckles Woodcock tells me that when he would be in the ring with elephants, sometimes he'd be tired and he'd forget, you know, what's next. And the elephants would just go ahead without him and finish the routine.

**Weber:** I fully believe that. I fully believe that. I had an experience exactly like that. My second horse—we always had miniatures because we had a limited/we were a tiny circus, so the ring was 15-feet in diameter. A conventional ring was 42 feet in diameter. So we always had small horses—horses, not ponies, and they were miniatures. Well

my second one was Dan Rice, named after the man who had a one-horse show. And Dan was retired in '93 after we liquidated the show. He was in the zoo. I was helping pay rent at the zoo by cleaning cages and so forth, and that zoo was a teaching zoo.

The guy who owned it had these students who wanted to learn animal husbandry. And so one day one of these college kids came up to me, and he said, "That damn Rice is nothing but a little biter and a hay-burner. You can't tell me he ever performed." And I said, "You see under that old oak tree, some red and yellow stripes?" And he said, "Yeah." I said, "That's our old ring curb. Go get it when you have a moment, put the sections together, and bring that little red and yellow tub over, and I'll show you what Dan Rice did." We hadn't worked for over a year. And I took him into the ring, and we went through our routine, perfectly, until he got to the pirouette and put his front legs on the tub and did his circle around it. And they were just amazed! We hadn't done the act forever. And I was so electric about the applause and everything that I didn't realize we weren't through. And suddenly behind me, I get pushed out of the way, and it's Dan going to the ring curb to do the final trick, the ring curb walk all the way around, and then out on his hind legs.

So, what you say is a universal experience. The animals know. And I think value. Now, I'm the first to admit there's cruelty—has been. And but there's also cruelty to we, to us who share the same spaces.

**Q:** But had you ever worked an animal or trained an animal before you started in? (Shakes head "no") Tell me about the process of your becoming a center-ring star and trainer.

**Weber:** I started with a duck in a magic act. But I found out that the duck could be a prop, could whisper secrets into my ear—I mean without doing anything. And then I had a dog, and I knew I didn't know how to train an animal. I knew I didn't want them to do rollovers and stuff that were done in living rooms. But I also knew that if you found out what the animal could do and they liked to do, you could coax it with something they accepted as a reward. And so I coaxed a little dog to jump through a hoop. But a Jesuit made a remark one time, "So what's this dog going to do now, hold a hoop for you to jump through?" "Oh my goodness, of course that's what we need to do." So my little dog was up in her little chair with her paws on the back of her chair. And we put a hoop under those paws, held it, of course, while an acrobat—before the audience knew what

was being set up—jumped through and did a rollout. And so we had a new kind of image.

**Q:** How many animals did you have on the show?

**Weber:** Well, I had the miniature horses. First horse we never got anything out of; he'd never been broke even to the ring. And so it was very tough. Second horse I got knew nothing except the ring. In other words, to work the perimeter of the circle. That breaking was done by Robert Baudy when I bought Dan Rice down in Florida—in Bushnell. He had the exotic breeding facility for exotic cats. And when Dan Rice got in the ring he knew he was to pay attention, but that's about all he knew. But that was enough; that was enough. We could get him to go through a big hoop. I found out he liked monkey biscuits; he loved them. So I got him to mount the tub and by simply walking him around and paying attention he knew how to do that pirouette. And then the ring curb. It was a matter of coaxing. You know, Wayne Franzen got Okha, and he was doing the same thing. And he asked Jim Voorhies one time to come

to Florida to see if he was doing the right thing, and the reply was, "She's doing it, isn't she? You must be doing it right."

**Q:** You say this was a two-way process. How were animals training you?

**Weber:** One day Dan Rice stopped. Absolutely stopped. Right before the second jump through the hoop. He would not budge. Nothing. So I was talking to him—I was a talking clown. And I could talk my way through anything, and that was kind of funny.

**Q:** So what was your clown name?

**Weber:** Mine. Because Lou used "Lou" and Emmett used "Emmett" and Otto used "Otto." So I kept my own name; I never used any other. Nick Weber. So that was my clown name, "Nick." So I talked to him. "It's easy. You just jump through like you just did?" So I'm talking to this horse. That's kind of funny, like I think and expect him to understand. So I said, "Look. I'll do it for you." And I jumped



Weber performs at Wabash College in 1978.

by Joyce Warden,

courtesy of Robert T. Ramsay, Jr. Archival Center at Wabash College, Crawfordsville, Indiana

through the hoop, and he followed me. With his teeth bared like he wanted to bite my southern end. And he followed me through again, and of course we kept it up, just like that. Now, did he know what he was doing? Probably not. But he sure was happy enough to do it again and keep it in the act.

**Q:** Meantime, what was Nick Weber doing?

**Weber:** It took me a while to figure this out, because I thought the real value was, as I told you, in the fables that came in between all these circus acts. Again, if you remember *The Giving Tree*, Shel Silverstein's tale that spoke to every one of every age, we did mimes—with narration—of things like the irrationality of fear, a little five-to-seven-minute story. I thought those were the values, those were the morality—we invented the morality play. And we put it inside of a circus. That's what I thought. And then we had poetry: "Just when machine gun fugues have endangered all of you..." The kind of thing circus does for the human spirit. So all of that. The whole thing was a mission, and it became accepted as that, as a very accepted outreach. On the other hand, the good Jesuit priest might have been lecturing on physics in a college or high school all of his productive day. Well, where's the ministry there? (smiles) There is one! I'm not at all calling into question the dedication and value of a vocation as a teacher—I was almost there myself. So you have to find where your values are.



RLC at Wabash College in 1978

courtesy of Robert T. Ramsay, Jr. Archival Center at Wabash College, Crawfordsville, Indiana

And you have to see in some way God's face in the subject at hand. I think it's easier in a circus.

**Q:** I'm assuming that there's no portable confessional booth that you took with you. So what was the substitute for the confessional booth in your ministry?

**Weber:** The conversation around dinner. Why isn't so and so at this table tonight? He's crying his eyes out behind the animal trailer. Boom! That's real stuff. My first confession was heard in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. My first baptism was in an Episcopal church in San Jose. My first wedding was on the top of Mount Tamalpais. I used to hear confessions on the track walking around inside of (Circus) Vargas's tent, where we had mass in center ring.

**Q:** In each of these cases, did you wear your collar?

**Weber:** No. For mass, there was always a stole. Quite often an alb, the long white robe. But never did I carry a full vestment. No way. The other problem I had with conventional ministry—priestly ministry in the Catholic sense—was that I was very dependent on a very close group of three, four, five young people from all over the gamut from Christianity or no religion. So for me to begin scheduling regular sacramental events would have been something of a trap for them, and also for me. Our first work was to get the show to the next town and up and out on time. Because we had really long jumps.

**Q:** Now when you say moving the show from town to town. Was this an open-air circus? Tell me what you did to set up.

**Weber:** We always performed in front of a canvas drop that was outside, guyed out in a gym or lobby or a shopping center mall, or it was on pedestals.

**Q:** So in effect you were a sidewaller.

**Weber:** Correct. But that drop idea, and the picture drops that were pulled behind the fables—all specially designed and painted for us in a layover—I got that idea from the San Francisco mime troupe in the late '60s, early '70s. And we had a ring. At the beginning it was a ribbon ring, just cloth

staked out when we were indoors, just Masonite strips. But as soon we got a horse, we had to get a real curb. So there was a ring curb in front of that. In the back of that drop, there was real sidewalling, to protect our privacy if we had to dress back there, to protect the animals, magic apparatus and so forth. Then outside behind that we also had the convenience of a trailer which could be used as a dressing trailer. And we had the band organ on one side and the wire rig, and on the other side the trapeze rig. By the late '70s we had all of that gear going.

**Q:** Obviously as the size of the fleet grew, the performance expanded. Tell me about the length of your initial performances compared to what it was in later years.

**Weber:** We were dictated by what we thought we could get out of a college audience in the middle of a day. That's really what set it, so it was about an hour. And sometimes, if we were doing an indoor evening show, after we developed concessions, we would put in an intermission, because we had to pay the insurance. I was bragging that I would be the only circus that ever sold anything. And boy, the liability insurance rates went sky-high, and we had to do something, because I did not want to change the fee. It was the fee that we had that you paid to get an assembly performance at a little grammar school or a free act on a college campus. I didn't want to boost that, so we put in cotton candy, popcorn, the whole thing.

**Q:** So you weren't after the same audience that a big-time Shrine circus was, were you?

**Weber:** No. Not at all.

**Q:** What was your target audience for your performances?

**Weber:** Any places that we could fit and get passers-by to sit down and watch a show. That was most of our bread-and-butter audience draw. And we went back to the same venues year after year, and we changed the show.

**Q:** What was your area?

**Weber:** The United States, the 48 contiguous states. So we would start out in San Jose, do a shakedown tour, down to Fresno and back up through the San Francisco Bay Area. And then

nurse our wounds a little bit if there were any at quarters in Santa Clara. And then we'd head, in the fall, north. Well, it was a school year, we played a lot of schools, mostly colleges at the beginning. We went all the way up as far as Portland, then turned east and went on a diagonal, everything south of a diagonal from Portland to Sarasota. And then came back to California by Christmas time, took the month off—because schools were out, and then started out again. Crazy, but that's the way the bookings came in. We went north all the way to Seattle and then east, and then everything north of that same diagonal, all the way across, lots of times indoors because it was snowing outside, all the way across to Yale, turned around the third week of April at Yale.

**Q:** You're talking about Yale University?

**Weber:** That's right. Yep, New Haven. And then back west by the end of May. And we were back in California, and we took the summer off (and) built a new show.

**Q:** So this was nothing short of total commitment.

**Weber:** You bet. Total commitment. And the marvelous thing is that in exchange for what became seven weeks of rehearsal, that the Jesuit community that I was stationed with supported—and they fed my kids. For seven weeks they trained with me, and then went out for eight months of really hard work and performance in exchange for train-



*Performers at Wabash College in 1978*

courtesy of Robert T. Ramsay, Jr. Archival Center at Wabash College, Crawfordsville, Indiana

ing. And it was all gratis. They got their round trip home at Christmas and their airfare home at the end of the season.

**Q:** What was the age range of your performers?

**Weber:** Usually they were either right out of high school or wanting to take a year off from college to look around. Before they continued their education, they maybe wanted to ask different kinds of questions, and you can imagine how their perspectives on life changed.

**Q:** How, then, did Royal Lichtenstein Circus change the lives of these kids?

**Weber:** I would say that most of them returned to fuller lives, very different than the lives they thought they were going to be in for. Several of them are running youth circus camps. Some went on for professional training and performed for circuses all over the world, really, and became very accomplished artists.

**Q:** And so, obviously, not all turned out well, then.

**Weber:** No. Some left unhappy. It was not what they needed or wanted. A couple were asked to leave because it

wasn't working out for either of us. It was a waste of their time and a waste of our time. It was almost a hundred people in those 22 years.

**Q:** And what was the size of the troupe at its height?

**Weber:** At one time we were nine, but there were three people who weren't performing. Two folks had come on to help with the business end of it. And that really didn't work out. And there was always someone there to—in the biggest days—someone to be business manager and house manager both. And because of concessions, someone to do all that front-end stuff while we took care of the actual performance.

**Q:** Was the Royal Lichtenstein Circus as much a happy-go-lucky troupe as it sounded?

**Weber:** Well, if you know circus, you know it wasn't happy-go-lucky. It was for the most part fairly content with what it was doing. And itself, everything was minutely structured, much more than a big conventional circus. It had to be, because everybody did everything. I mean, the discipline was incredible.

**Q:** Talking about doubling up?

**Weber:** Well, yes. We quadrupled (laughs), in brass. I remember one time a priest came into a parish hall one night in the East—Pennsylvania or someplace—and we were tearing down. And we did the same thing every day—we were exhausted. We traveled, set up, performed and now we were tearing down. And it was done in utter silence. Absolute silence. Everybody knew what to do. And he came in and he looked around, and he said, "This is religious!" Umm, true. That was as much a part of what we did together and for our audiences as the performance itself.

**Q:** How did Nick Weber grow and change during this time?

**Weber:** Life on the road, apart from conventional religious life outside of a Jesuit community, away from a superior's guidance and the regular spiritual director's guidance, meant that I did not have to live what you would expect to be the life of a Jesuit priest. And I mean that in all ordinary senses. And I didn't. I found other ways to experience the presence of God than the strict, church-going, sacramental minister. And I took God in all things—I took St. Ignatius, the founder of the Jesuits, at his word. I, as I suggested to you earlier about the animals, I found the entire ball of wax sacramental—the presence of God in the whole thing. So,



Weber and members of the RLC perform.

courtesy of Nick Weber

long story short, I wasn't crossing the T's and dotting the I's of Jesuit life. That was one thing that happened. Another thing is that I am a quipster; I can be very flip. And the church was changing in its attitudes towards women. The social justice concern—you mentioned liberation theology—I worked very closely with, for example, people of homosexual persuasion. And the church was roundly condemning whatever they understood by "the gay life." And meanwhile my business manager had contracted AIDS and was dying. And I was supposed to disown my best friend? Women could not be ordained. I was once asked to give a vocations talk in which I said, "There is no shortage of vocations. There is a shortage of ideas on who could have a vocation." And so I began to be more outspoken, even to myself, about what the Church stood for, and what I as a Jesuit, if I wore a collar or signed my name "S.J." and so forth, would be expected to stand for, and I couldn't. And so as I looked into the mirror—besides the wrinkles—how much I had changed. I also—I wasn't a Jesuit anymore, really. And I couldn't espouse what I was being asked to stand for as a Jesuit priest. Then there were also people taking notes on my remarks, on my activities, and reporting—I had no idea this was going on. A file was being kept.

**Q:** I take it, then, that your higher power within the Church had changed during this time.

**Weber:** Yes. The Church was changing, not the Jesuits. The Jesuits were extremely able to accept changes of ideas and so forth, but the Jesuits take a fourth vow—that they have to report to the Papacy. I mean you do that, and I was professed of the fourth. Well, eventually someone threatened to take my case—my beliefs and some of my behaviors—public, even to the editorial board of a big newspaper. And the Provincial panicked, understandably. And I said to him—and this was all going on (over) truck stop phones; nobody had cell phones, all this—and I said, "OK, Number 1, there's no way that I'm going to bring any kind of disparagement to my family, the Jesuits. I will leave first." And the other thing that was happening was that I was beginning to understand that I had not lived as a Jesuit for a while, and I did not believe everything that a Jesuit was expected to believe. So eventually, with help from Jesuits I loved a great deal, some of the brightest people I ever met, I found my way outside of the Jesuits. And it was determined and discerned, with my superiors, that I would leave the order. I wasn't booted. I was invited to another way of life outside the circus, which wouldn't draw as much publicity. And I thought, "I don't want to do that. I'm not a Jesuit." And I

signed out in 1993.

**Q:** In the process—how should I put it?—in the process did you have to denounce your vows as a Jesuit? I mean, how did you sign off as a Jesuit?

**Weber:** Well, it's a long process. It takes months for Rome to process the papers. And so you don't get them for a long time. And you are dispensed from your vows, and you are laicized, so that if you chose to marry, it would be legal because you are effectively a layperson.

**Q:** So did you marry?

**Weber:** No, no.

**Q:** Then how did your life change now that you were no longer a Jesuit?

**Weber:** Well, I tried the circus for a while, booking it-self. I was completely independent—bank account and all that stuff. And that was when Cheeko (Brent Dewitt) was with us. And once we got out of the school year and into the summer up as far as Baltimore, I couldn't do it anymore. I was doing everything—there were three of us out. And so we decided to stop it, went back—we had bills to pay.



*Weber entertains a crowd.*

courtesy of Nick Weber

# Nick Weber: friend, mentor, master of circus, theater and life...

## and how he influenced me to start Amazing Grace CIRCUS!

by Carlo Pellegrini

It's 1972, in the backyard of our first host family in what would be a year on the road with Nick Weber's Royal Lichtenstein 1/4-Ring Sidewalk Circus, and our partner John McConaghy. Nick and I are cleaning out the animal cages for our next show when he says to me: "Carlo, there's something wrong with this hose. The water won't come out. Go down to the other end and see if it's clogged up."

Dutifully, I walk down to the other end of the hose about eight feet away, pick it up, look deeply into the end of the hose and declare: "No, I don't see anything."

Next thing I know Nick has spontaneously combusted! He's hooping, hollering, and laughing harder than I've ever seen him laugh before. His legs are pumping up and down and going sideways while he's slapping his thighs with his hand. It's quite a scene. He's gasping for breath through his huge, gap-toothed smile, as he blurts:

"I now know that God loves you more than he loves me!"

I still didn't get it, so he explained: "You see, I sent you down there knowing that you were going to fall for my ruse. As soon as you looked into the hose, I was going to turn the water on and splash you good. But as soon as you DID look, the water wouldn't turn on! The faucet handle got stuck, or something, and so the joke's on me!"

If you are a student of clowning then you know this was a classic White Clown and Auguste setup. The whole history of clowning from Aristophanes to Commedia del'Arte to The Fratellini's to Ed Wynn, Jack Benny, Abbott and Costello, Danny Kaye and Chris Rock...all neatly packaged in a water gag of about 20 seconds. In that moment, I then knew that running away from college to join the circus was worth every bit of joy, angst, risk

and reward I had imagined it might be. I was getting the education of a lifetime.

But why would a 20-year-old college student leave home and a comfortable existence to join a circus run by a Jesuit priest, leading an itinerant life passing the hat to make a living? I knew the moment I met Nick that I was in the presence of greatness...and I wanted to absorb as much knowledge and skill from this man as I could. It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and I said YES! And besides, the salary was great: \$1 a day and all expenses paid!

Nick's personality is a combination of Robin Williams, Thomas Merton, Plato, George Carlin, Houdini, Gerard Manley Hopkins and every circus that ever passed through his little hometown north of San Francisco. He is a virtual catalogue of vaudeville routines and topic-appropriate



Carlo Pellegrini in RLC wardrobe

courtesy of Carlo Pellegrini

jokes. As a consummate showman, magician and a true man of the theater, Nick naturally has an intellect that is analytic, philosophic, and poetic...and a heart that is inspirational...besides being the best educator I ever met. I wanted to be Nick Weber...but I was just a kid with a lot to learn.

I longed to be as funny and as adept at managing an audience as he was. I realized, though, I couldn't compete at his level so I had to pick one opportunity when I could shine. Hecklers were a part of every show we performed, and Nick was a master at handling hecklers. He had a line for every occasion and circumstance. My chance came on a sunny day in Greeley, Colorado, well into the second half of our national tour in 1973. We had a large college crowd and some guy just kept pestering us during the show. Nick had already used his three best lines on

him and he hadn't stopped. When I came out to do my rendition of The Niteclock (an old Ed Wynn routine Nick had expanded upon), the guy interrupted me. I let him have the one heckler line I had purloined from an old Reader's Digest magazine three months earlier: "You've got a ready wit; would you let us know when it's ready?" The audience loved it but I heard Nick backstage howling! I had finally gotten the Master's approval...a loud and hearty laugh.

To this day, each endeavor I have undertaken since that perfect year in 1972—as a professional dancer, TV and movie actor, Ringmaster and White Clown with Big Apple Circus (1980-'84), advertising executive, professional keynote speaker, youth leader—has been informed by Nick Weber's tutelage. He taught me how to take something old and make it new, and my own; how to emphasize the new, and the importantly new; that "if you can't fix it, feature it". He taught me how to be awake and alive to the moment...and to listen intently. And he taught me to have the courage to speak my mind.

Fast-forward 30 years to 2002, standing before my first youth circus troupe of teens—Amazing Grace CIRCUS! Little did I realize in that moment that I would be recreating and re-imagining that year on the road with Nick; that year of discovery, poetry and grace; that year of traveling across country in my generation's first 'youth circus' in a beat-up Pontiac station-wagon housing three humans, a duck, two doves, a golden pheasant, a dog and spider monkey. The moment to 'pass it on' had arrived and what better way to honor Nick than to teach these kids the routines he had taught me, and the 100 or so other young people he had trained in the 22 years of RLC's existence.

Here we are in 2014 and it's only taken me 42 years to distill the 'RLC Experience' of what circus is and what it means to me—and what exactly I am passing on to the next generation. It's taken me 12 years to make 'The AGC Experience' different, and importantly new. Nick instilled in those of us who were in his show, and those who saw it, the feeling that they had a heart, mind, soul and poetry in their blood. He expanded our minds and the horizons of our belief about what is possible so that we could lead an important life. His circus gave us that 'something different' that shook up our senses, came to 'our town', and left the hamlet of our imaginations more full than when it entered.



Weber and Pellgrini in 1972

courtesy of Nick Weber

## When ex-priest entered 'circus man's heaven'

Nick Weber's shift in 1994 from unpaid circus producer/performer/cleric to "commercial entertainment," as he called his new vocation, was fairly radical.

Joining up with a small three-ring tented circus in 1994, however, became a most welcome change following a brief stint as a short-order cook at a family restaurant.

It didn't take long for Weber—now shorn of his status as an ordained minister of the gospel, a Jesuit, no less—to realize that he had made the right decision after closing his Royal Lichtenstein Circus the year before.

To be able to wear the skull cap and makeup of a traditional white-face joey on the three-ring Roberts Bros. Circus required the former clown/ringmaster of 22 years to shave his beard and sharply trim his shoulder-length hair.

The timing of his ring introduction as a white-face clown couldn't have been worse—at least to those who were scared of clowns and who had read a recent best-sell-

ing horror book. "I had no idea that Stephen King had just come out with *It*, the novel about the white clown who ate children. That was a dreadful coincidence."

For the next 4½ seasons, Weber became an experienced mud show kinker, replete with many triumphs and pitfalls in the one, three, and five-ring settings.

Finally, it was just too much. Nick the clown was rescued from a series of devastating migraine headaches by an ex-performer on Weber's first nationwide tour of his iconic tiny show in 1972. Returning to the theater—"the first artistic arena for which I actually had training," Weber wrote and toured with a one-man production, *And Jesus Laughed*.

"I was upset that the shortest verse in the Bible was 'And Jesus wept.' I cannot believe that Jesus didn't laugh a lot. So I wrote that," Weber explained during a 2012 interview.

Overall, he recalled, touring and performing under canvas was like being "in circus man's heaven."

**Weber:** When we decided that the Royal Lichtenstein Circus had run its course (in 1993), and I subsequently had



Weber addresses an audience at Wabash College in 1978.

by Joyce Warden, courtesy of Robert T. Ramsay, Jr.  
Archival Center at Wabash College, Crawfordsville, Indiana

decided to leave the Jesuit order, there were bills to pay, and my business partner at the time, Jennie Madrigal, and I took the show back to Belleview, Florida, just south of Ocala. The reason we went there is for years we had the services of a marvelous vet, who knew all of our livestock and cared for them immensely. He also owned a private zoo, attached to the clinic. He trained students who were interested in interning for animal care. That would be a home for our animals. To pay our parking rent on the property we cleaned the cages in that zoo and helped offset his increased feed bill. We parked several of the living quarters in an RV park called Campertown. And then Jennie, who was a trained Denny's restaurant manager before she joined on with us, got a real job in a 24-hour restaurant. I lasted 90 days as a prep cook in that restaurant. That plus helping at the zoo, keeping an eye on our animals as they adjusted to a new home, that's where we were.

**Q:** So you didn't like being a short order cook?

**Weber:** I just had to quit. I couldn't take that. And so I'm sitting in Campertown where we had our vehicles parked, and I'm thinking, "I've got to get some work in an area that I know something about." The easiest thing was clowning, a different type of clown than I had been for 22 years. But a clown that we had created for a young man who would be

out front of the show before it happened, before we actually started up, and he would look like a conventional white clown to do house management, keep an eye open for security risks, and so forth. And then he would take off the skull cap, change the costume, and he would look like the rest of us in the ensemble. And that character became "Monsieur La Plume," because the hat had a big white feather plume on it. I had all those costumes and I had all that makeup—I had helped with the invention of that clown. So I took that clown, adapted it to my style, shaved, cut my hair so that the skull cap wouldn't be bulky, and went to Roberts Bros. I worked there for the season of 1994. After that I went to Carson & Barnes for three years, and in '98 I transferred down the road in Hugo, Oklahoma to Kelly Miller.

**Q:** I'd like to go into more detail about your experiences with Roberts Bros. and Carson & Barnes and Kelly Miller. First, how did you connect with Roberts Bros.? And tell me also, if you will, about the transition from being a circus producer to a circus employee.

**Weber:** There's a memory lapse for me about how I got connected with Roberts Bros. By that time I knew Brent Dewitt, "Cheeko the Clown," who was a very close friend of the Earl family [owners of Roberts Bros.]. And I suspect that Cheeko had something to do with my connection, but



*Roberts Bros. Circus lot*

courtesy of Paul Gutheil

it's not clear...But I got hired at Roberts Bros., and I came under the care and concern of the producing clown there, Rob Wainwright. Rob helped prepare me, told me to make sure I had what I needed for a mud show—to bring galoshes and all that. So I helped Rod-O with his entrees for the ring. Basically that was my introduction to the commercial tent circus, the largest circus venue I'd ever performed in. I drove truck for them—there's an aphorism for it: if you can drive, you can get a job on a mud show. They're always looking for drivers. Rod-O was the arrow man for that show—he and his wife. So I got used to that kind of regimen. I also helped out in the cookhouse.

**Q:** How difficult was it to make the transition of no longer being the boss, no longer running the show, and your feelings about drawing an honest-to-god paycheck?

**Weber:** I got paid for the work. Yes. I had to. That was one of the reasons I went to work. Because when we liquidated our show we had bills to pay, and I had to pitch in. I think right from the get-go I found that I was much stronger, because of my background, as a talking clown than I was as a comic in the ring. I didn't know any physical comedy besides what an actor on the stage knows about "takes" and all that kind of thing. But as far as falling and tumbling, I knew none of that. But, because of my background in the theater and my performance with the Royal Lichtenstein Circus and—I can't deny it—because of my training as a Jesuit, I could talk. I think from pretty early on working for other circuses I recognized my forte as the come-in, when the audience was assembling. I was free to develop my own little gags and walk-arounds as the audience was coming in. I embraced that. It was fun working with Rod-O. And we did talk. The tent was small enough that we could be heard.

**Q:** To what extent were you aware of Dan Rice at that point? Do you think your act could have been a 20<sup>th</sup> century parallel to Dan Rice?

**Weber:** I wasn't completely conscious of it, but I knew that it had been done before. I had read *One Horse Show* and I was familiar with how Doc Spaulding had gipped him out of all but his one horse. And my favorite of three horses was named Dan Rice. Because at one time we only had that one horse he became my favorite. And he was named Dan Rice because he was a member of a one-horse show at that time. It was that connection.

I knew that Dan Rice was a very political person and made lots of political commentary from the ring. Well, I

couldn't very well make political commentary from the ring in somebody else's circus, like I did in ours pretty much. Even on our show, I couldn't name names but I could say something and then say, "Well, if they're going to write the material in Washington, I'm going to use it here in Stratford" or wherever. I didn't do that type of thing on commercial circuses. But I was aware that Dan Rice was a wisecracking clown who did a lot of talking. I also knew he was a singing clown, and I can't sing at all. And I wasn't going to get as sophisticated as he was. I knew he had done parodies of Shakespeare from the ring. I wasn't about to do that. But I knew there was a precedent for talking clowns. I espoused that.

**Q:** Did you have a clown name at that point? And how did you exploit your clown character?

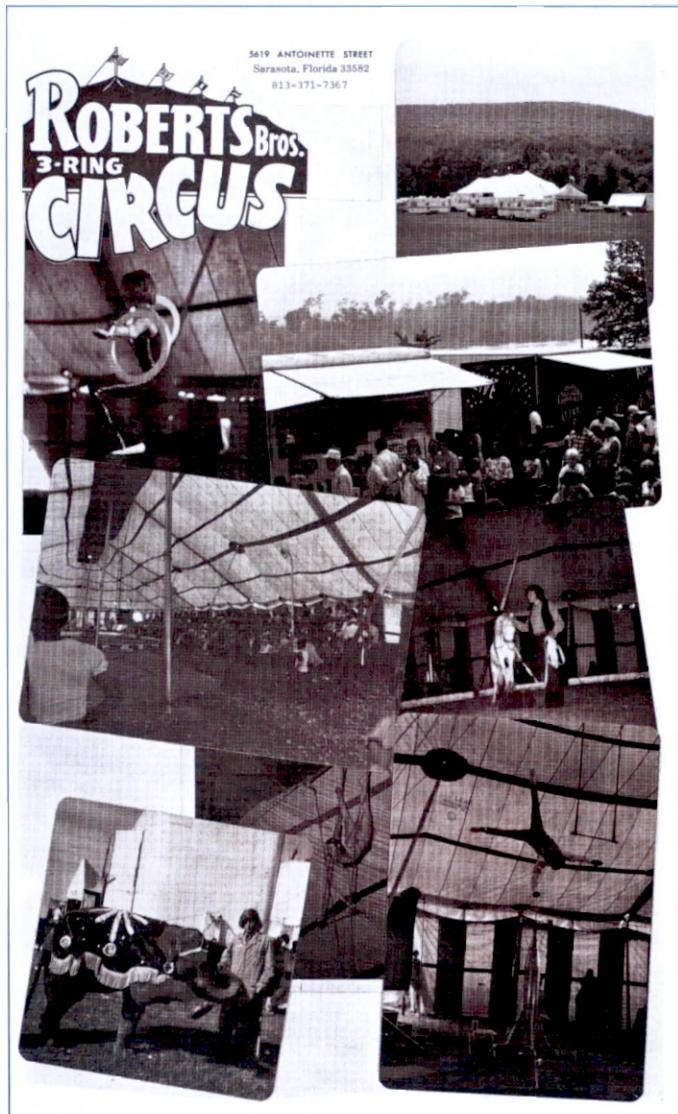
**Weber:** I didn't have a clown name because all of my



Dan Rice

courtesy of Ed Limbaugh

idols used their own name: Felix Adler; Emmett Kelly had a clown name, Weary Willie. But we know him as Emmett Kelly. Of course, my great idol, Lou Jacobs, was known as Lou. And so I was Nick, or Nick Weber. And the clown that I had developed for our show and then assumed for my own commercial clowning was modeled after the all-white clowns that I remembered from my boyhood. I found them poetic; I found them attractive to look at—something about the white and the very simple make-up that had an aesthetic appeal to me. So that's why I went there. I had no idea that Stephen King had just come out with *It*, the novel about the white clown who ate children. That was a dreadful coincidence. I hadn't read a word of Stephen King ever, but it didn't take long to find out that there were people, including children and adults, who were deathly afraid of



Advertising for Roberts Bros.

courtesy of The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

clowns and seemingly more afraid of white clowns. So I was an all-white clown. Rod-O was quite white but moving toward the auguste. And then later when I got to Carson & Barnes in '95 I was privileged to work with Popcorn, Tom Sink, who was an auguste—and a very fine one.

**Q:** When did you join Roberts Bros.? Was that at the start of the season?

**Weber:** Oh yes. I was there before they left quarters.

**Q:** Where?

**Weber:** Sarasota. That made it very handy. I just moved from Bellevue, Florida, down to Sarasota and unloaded my stuff—far too much. I carried with me a self-portrait I owned by that time—of Emmett Kelly—to put up in whatever living quarters I had. I had half of the overshoot of the fifth wheel cookhouse. I had half of that for my living quarters. I had a window! I had a roof over my head. And I was in circus man's heaven.

**Q:** Do you recall how much your first paycheck was or how much you were paid during that first season?

**Weber:** I don't remember what the Roberts Bros. paycheck was but I remember that Carson & Barnes was 200 bucks and Kelly Miller was \$250.

**Q:** For what, a week or a month?

**Weber:** A week. And that meant working two shows a day and driving. And on Carson & Barnes, the Chinese included the trash pickup in the morning of departure... On Kelly Miller I didn't have to drive and I don't think I had to do pickup.

**Q:** Tell me about the transition from a small mud show, Roberts—to a big mud show, Carson & Barnes.

**Weber:** The bigger the show, the less you had to work, usually. That didn't translate for me mostly on those shows. I have to say both the Earls and then the Miller-Byrd family—and the Rawls—took very good care of us. You know, by comparison the paycheck wasn't so big. But I felt comfortable all the time.

**Q:** What kind of transition did you have to make from the smaller Roberts Bros. to the bigger Carson & Barnes, and what were your responsibilities respectively as a clown in both cases?

**Weber:** On Carson & Barnes just the physicality of the lot for a five-ring circus was a bigger deal. And ideally you

had a lot more of the public to entertain because it was a bigger circus, much bigger. You also had more performers to interface with, and I worked with more clowns and different performance skills, some better than others. On Carson & Barnes I worked with other ethnic backgrounds in the cast in general, but even on clown alley we had Hispanic clowns. One of my favorite clowns was the Hispanic father of the tent boss. And I just couldn't wait to join him on one of his come-in spots. He would play the trumpet and he had a little dog. I just loved being with him and the reason is he made me laugh.

**Q:** That was who?

**Weber:** Jaime Garcia's father, and I can't remember his name. I can't remember whether he had a clown name or not. But his first line before he stopped in a section was "You like music? I play music for you." And he would play something on the trumpet.

**Q:** So what did you do as a come-in clown? And tell me a little bit about that process—how you related to Dory Miller, who was always there for the performance.

**Weber:** Well, I had a relationship with Dory long before I joined. I never knew I would join out with them. When we were touring around and had some time to visit Carson & Barnes, I got to know Jim Judkins as the general manager who found parking for us; they knew we had livestock on a day off, so they could accommodate us. And I always wanted to sit as close as I could to that live band, so I would always tip Dory on the lot with a fresh new package of Red Man chewing tobacco, and he would let me sit in one of those chairs next to the performers' entrance. I already knew and respected him a great deal.

At come-in, which was my favorite part of working as a clown on the show, because I was free—I got to talk to the audience directly, I built up a repertoire. I had an invisible dog—and no, I did not have one of those omnipresent clown leashes that was stiff and had a harness hanging out there. I just introduced the dog as half vapor terrier and half Airedale. I'd get it to jump through a hoop or something, and it was all the imagination, of course, of the audience. The little kids were looking under their seats to find whatever it was that I was talking to. My favorite line was "You ain't seen nothing yet" and have the dog do a double somersault or something. It was the invisible dog. I had some physical props that I developed myself. One was a gigantic cotton candy serving. Of course it was really cotton sprayed pink. But it would look like the real thing; it was gigantic. I would

say, "Did any of you ladies in this section lose this wig out by the pony ride? I found it out there. Nobody? How about these?" And I would turn it around, and there was a pair of dark glasses stuck in the floss, like somebody had been too eager to bit into it and then left their glasses. So I did that kind of stuff, and I had a candied apple—caramel, I guess—it's hard to find a real candied apple on any lot anymore. On one side of it I had a pair of dentures stuck into it. I had those kinds of things. Sometimes I would come up to a section and say, "Where were you? It's so hot and I was sweating in that tent out there, and you walked right by. You didn't see me out there. You didn't see my advertising. I am the world's only man living born with two belly buttons."—It was an old gag; I'd seen it in a novelty store somewhere—"Yes, that's true. I was born with two belly buttons. You wanna see them?" And of course, the more appropriately dressed and fastidious lady who would say, "Oh, I don't." "But you're looking!" I would build it up; then I would lift up the tunic and I had two great big buttons, each with the word "belly" on it. Corn right out of Kansas, but I got a laugh at that; they loved it. When the cell phone became more and more and more common, I would de-



Dory R. Miller

photo by Phil Moyer

velop things. I was shocked the first time I saw a person at the circus talking on the telephone. Now it's everywhere; of course, they have cameras, you know, video cameras. But here's somebody, you know, at the circus, talking on a cell phone. The first time I saw that I was shocked. The second time I said, "Oh, would you tell her that I've got to do a little more work here at the office but I'll be home for dinner by seven. Should I pick something up on the way home?" And the person was totally floored by that; the audience was laughing. That stuck, and I kept that for quite a while. And then, especially on Carson & Barnes, I really got to work with Popcorn and got to learn what an entrée could be.

**Q:** Tell me about Popcorn.

**Weber:** Tom Sink, who was a legendary clown and had been on Carson & Barnes years before, ran away with a magician's spook show when he was 17. He and I were



Popcorn on the Kelly Miller show

courtesy of Paul Gutheil

the same age. But he had been with commercial entertainment—especially circus—all his life. And he was very established; he was well known. We just happened to land in Hugo, Oklahoma, on Carson & Barnes, the same year. This was his second stint with Carson & Barnes, and the following year he would go to Kelly Miller, and eventually I would join him over there.

**Q:** For better or for worse, Dory Miller had a reputation for not exactly valuing clowning in his makeup of the performance. What would you say to that?

**Weber:** I didn't experience that. I didn't experience that at all. As a consumer of circus, as a person stung with circus in my heart from the time when I was five years old, I knew that the clowns were only part of this whole thing and maybe not the most important part. So I wasn't, you know, inflated with the important position that a clown has in the circus. I didn't really figure out what the clown is doing on a circus for years. I just knew it was part of the package. So I didn't have any inflated expectations about how I would be treated. But I knew Dory Miller, and I had great respect for him, and I think he liked me. I remember him coming up to me and asking at quarters one time what I thought about the chances for building a new clown firehouse gag for the show; they hadn't had one for years and years. He wanted to do one with the ponies pulling the fire wagon in, an old fashion period piece. We talked about that, and that was one of my earliest memories of clown routines. I really liked the idea, but the fact of the matter was that takes more clowns than we had. Even though that was a five-ring show we only had four or five clowns. So that never got off the ground. But he consulted me. One time at quarters he asked me to go pick up a dog that he wanted to incorporate in a Dalmatian and pony act because he knew *101 Dalmatians* was coming out in theaters. Sure enough, that was a very successful act.

[Dory] and I got along very well, and he even copped one of my lines. I used to walk out into the marquee during the come-in when the public was arriving. The marquee on that show was at the start of the menagerie. It was in the old days classically, even though we had a tent for the menagerie, you walked down the alley with marvelous exotic species on either side of you, and then through the backdoor into the tent. So I would go out to the marquee and say to the public, "Come on in, come on in. There's plenty of seats; the fat lady quit yesterday." Dory, often if he was on the show, he would be sitting in the marquee in his director's chair. One day there was almost nobody coming in; it was just trickle, trickle, trickle. All we did, the clowns

would get together and just gossip. There was virtually no one to entertain. So I went out to the marquee on this day as people were coming in, and I was standing there kind of sad. I heard this voice—and it was D.R. behind me; I didn't see him sitting there—"Nick, where's that fat lady today? We need her."

Then the most caring thing he did that I experienced—I experienced it with him a lot—happened one afternoon before the matinee. I was doing come-in and I was in front of a section, and I knew exactly where I was in the tent when he did it. I felt a tug on my sleeve and turned and, my goodness, there was the boss owner. He just mumbled to me, "Nick, your friend Wayne Franzen was killed in the ring today." I guess he just expected me to go on and keep on entertaining, which I did. In DeMille's words, "You always come up smiling if you're a circus performer." But that touched me a great deal.

As far as respecting D.R.'s circus knowledge, he was in the tent on a very muddy day, I remember. It was, I think, still raining, but the water had hit the lot before the tent was unrolled. So it was really, really, really bad. They were having a hard time pulling the poles up. D.R. was in the tent. The elephants were sliding in the mud. Their traction seemed impossible, and the poles' bottoms were sinking. He just called over the boss canvasman, who was a very ex-

perienced man, and said, "Get me two more bulls in harness and one tractor." They changed the way—the sequence—in which they pulled those poles up. Instead of pulling up the quarter poles first, and then the center poles, they pulled four or five poles up abreast of each other at the same time. It worked like a charm. That was, of course, the fruit of experience. And this 80-year-old man had that.

**Q:** Of course, circus producers like Dory Miller were famous for carrying around bags of cash. Do you have a similar story?

**Weber:** Yes, I have one. When I went to work for Carson & Barnes, I was on the way into the bank at Hugo [Oklahoma], because I worked there through the winter. As I was coming along to the front door of the bank, here is D.R. Miller coming towards me from the other direction, and he's carrying a plastic bag full of coin and paper. I couldn't believe it! But I guess that's part of the trade.

**Q:** Now I realize that you had owned probably the smallest circus in America. But you'd also been seen along the way and been entertained by the owners of some of the biggest circuses in America. Tell me about that and as you were traveling how you were developing relationships with these other circuses.



*Carson & Barnes Circus lot*

courtesy of Paul Gutheil

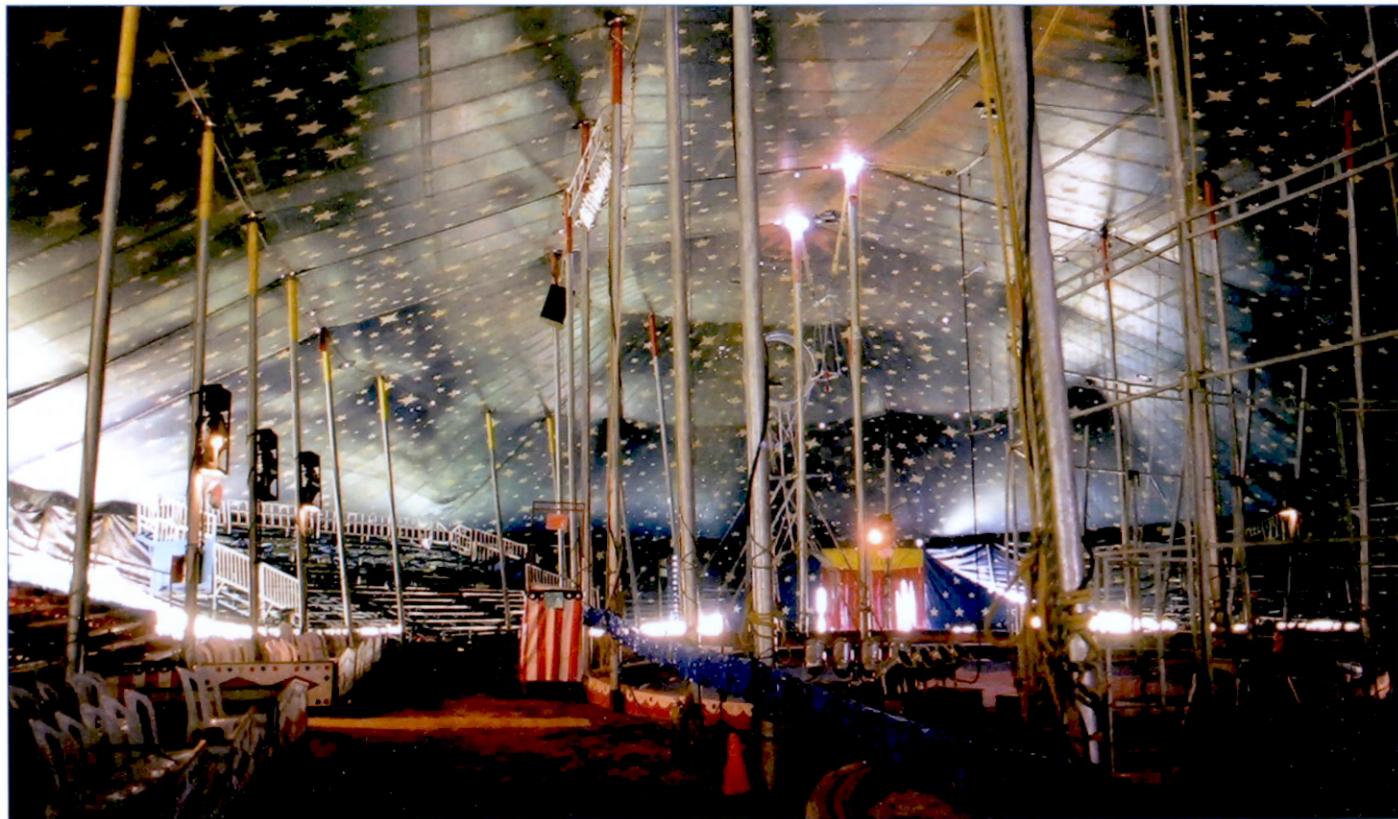
**Weber:** There weren't too many that I knew as well as I knew Carson & Barnes. I don't know whether it was because we were crossing paths with Carson & Barnes more often than others or not. But certainly part of it was the attitude of that show towards other people and towards the business. And Jim Judkins was one of the most welcoming presences that we had.

I had another benefit that happened, almost out of the blue. During the 1970s when I was stationed at Santa Clara University where our circus was born—right there in the Mission Gardens we used to rehearse and perform and so forth, and my partners were housed in the same dorm building that I was in during rehearsals—a phone rang in my room. It was Little Sister Joel. She said, "Father, you've probably never heard of the Little Sisters of Jesus, but we were founded to minister to nomadic people, whether it be indigenous tribes in North Africa or Middle East or circus and carnival people in Europe, gypsy groups in Europe. And now we want to establish a fraternity"—even though they were all women, they called a community a 'fraternity'—in America. Where would you suggest we go?" I said, "Sister, right now, arguably the finest three-ring traditional circus in America is Circus Vargas." They went there and hired out. That's their modus operandi, to take jobs like anybody

else, get a paycheck to pay their way. Then everybody on the circus would know, gradually, who they were and what they stood for and what they would do for you, as a parent educating a child for first communion, as a community of Catholics who wanted to have mass for a special day. They knew the network of priests throughout the country who would be willing to come and celebrate mass, do baptisms, bless marriage, whatever. They stayed with Vargas for eight years. Whenever I went to Vargas, or a circus later that they were on, I had that entrée. They welcomed me and introduced me to people on the show. So that was a big one.

Now Franzen Bros. Circus was another circus where I had an entrée because one of my alums went to work for them when he left us. Again, Wayne, as everybody knows was very, very approachable. So I knew him personally and was welcomed. But I never got into the backyard; I never tried to muscle my way in to be more familiar with the management or anything like that than a visiting man who had a circus.

**Q:** Nevertheless, you had seen some good-sized circuses, right? I mean, you saw Vargas. And of course you were familiar with Carson & Barnes. Carson & Barnes and Kelly Miller circuses seemed to be real mud shows in that there was nothing pretentious about them, in my way of think-



Carson & Barnes big top

courtesy of Paul Gutheil

ing. They had their own niche, and they were what they were in the circus industry. Do you ascribe to that?

Weber: Yes.

Q: And how do you see that niche playing out during your years at Carson & Barnes?

Weber: Carson & Barnes in 1995 when I came on the show was big. Very animal oriented. And concerned with production elements that it had always been concerned with. For instance, a real kind of chorus of performers opening with a real form of pageantry. I think in that first season I was on there they hired a troupe of Chinese acrobats. So spec was completely redesigned. Elephant blankets were all oriental. It was a magnificent show just to look at, just the properties that had to have been assembled during quarters, and the amount of oriental artifacts and coolie hats and oriental smocks. I designed the world's largest fortune cookie, a huge one, which I carried in spec. I think that they, as it were, tried to come up out of the mud with the

best of what a mud show is. I really respected them for that. So it was big—you really did get your money's worth. And the amount of expertise on the show, I mean, was nothing to sneeze at. You had excellent equestrian work; you had the marvelous assembly of elephants; and aerial stuff, I mean it was all terrific—two flying acts at one time. The first display after the opening pageant not only had something in every one of the five rings, they also sandwiched young people learning equilibristic skills in between the rings. You could have seven things going on at one time. It was amazing.

Q: Compare the experience going from Carson & Barnes to Kelly Miller, and why and how did you make the transition?

Weber: I was three full seasons on Carson & Barnes. I learned, I think, everything that I could have learned and used on Carson & Barnes. But my first partner on Carson & Barnes, Tom Sink—Popcorn—had two years before moved over to Kelly Miller. And Kelly Miller was a one-ring show

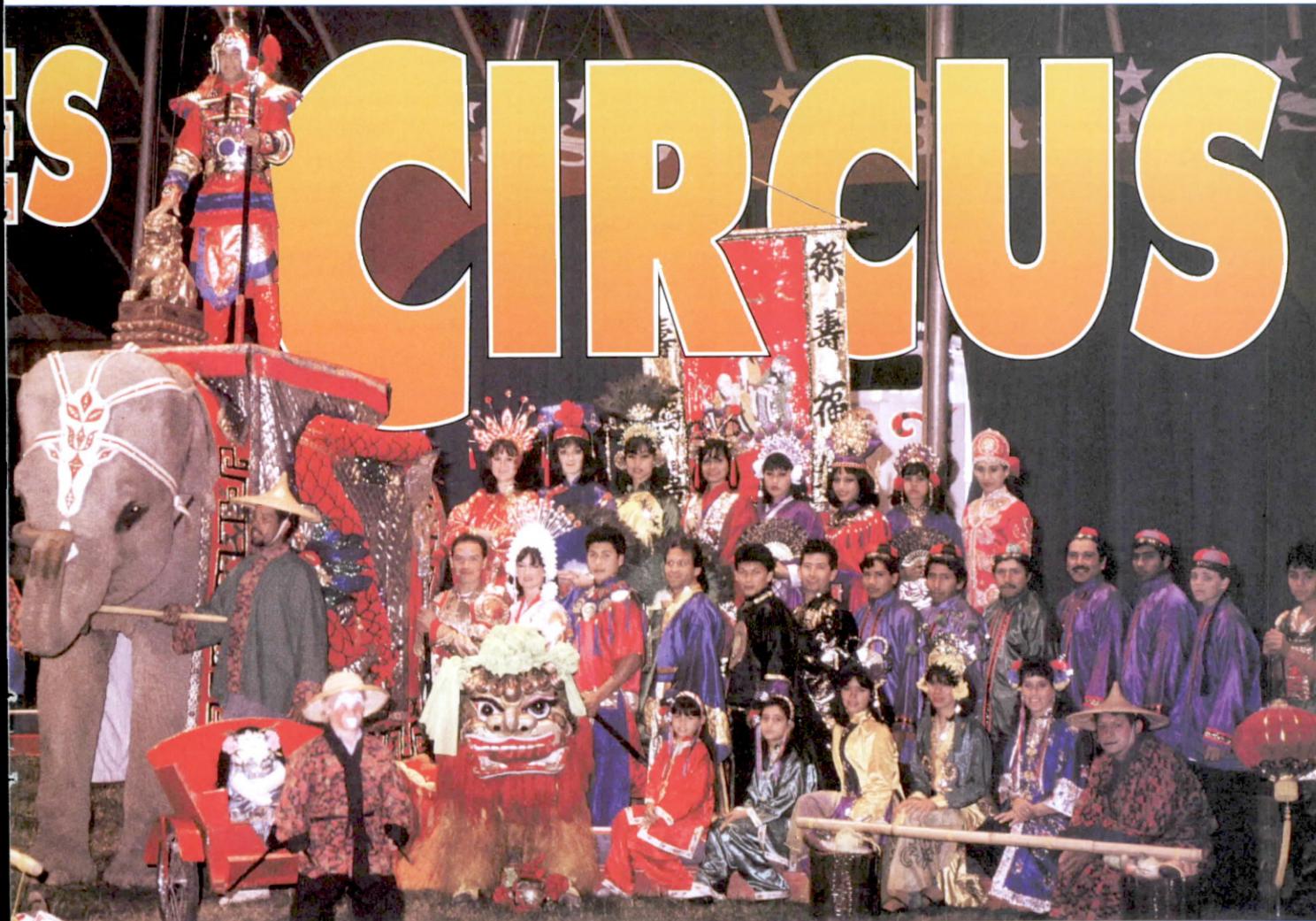


Carson & Barnes advertising circa 1995

and had a very fine reputation, very strong. And I thought that with Tom and that smaller, more focused format I could do better work. And so I went over there, and it was a move just down the road, and I know that there was sadness that I was rejecting what had been my home for three years, on the part of Barbara (Miller-Byrd). I don't know when he found out that I was transitioning over there, but D.R. wouldn't ask me that season "Are you going to play circus with us next year?" It was not easy to leave them.

I went over to Kelly Miller because that show really did have that proximity with the audience when you were doing a clown production number, an entrée. And because I wouldn't stop talking (laughs) in the ring—I mean they were right there like in my own little circus, you know, that's why I could talk to them; the people were very, very close to me. In fact, one day somebody on the lot showed up with what management had bought for me: a wireless head mike; it was black, like they usually were. Nowadays they're pink. That wouldn't have worked for me either be-

cause I was all white, all white. And then have this black thing coming out of—[gestures to where his collar ruff was]. I just balked. And I probably angered somebody, because they spent some money on that thing. I just could not work with that aesthetically. And so that went by the by. But I worked talking. Popcorn was comfortable with that. He could talk, too, and did. So we got along just fine. My biggest piece was a cooking act where I was the chef. And Popcorn was prepared. He would make sure that you had the right adjustment to your costume to establish you—in this case the character of a chef preparing something on the stove. Bizarre things happened. A hand came out of the saucapot, and indications that this was bizarre. And the blow off, of course, was an explosion, and out he came in a giant chicken costume. So that was a ball; we really had a ball. I had a tangle—something I really didn't like. I don't think a clown should be used to sell anything. And they asked me to augment my income by selling coloring books. I didn't take to that well. I did it, but it wasn't something I



courtesy of The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

liked to do. I felt that I was exploiting the trust of children.

**Q:** Compare the responsibilities on Kelly Miller and Carson & Barnes, the similarities and the differences.

**Weber:** Well I didn't have to drive on Kelly Miller, and I made a little more cash—50 bucks a week more. I didn't have as comfortable living quarters. I shared a small truck with two other people including the ringmaster.

**Q:** And the ringmaster was who?

**Weber:** Sorry, I can't remember. I lost him as a roommate because he fell in love with an aerialist on the show, and she had roomy accommodations. Part of my Chinese was to put up the cook tent. And the workmen were very good to me; right away they realized that I didn't know this end of a hammer to hit the stake, so they would come over and drive stakes much faster than I could.

**Q:** Beyond that, what were the differences between the two shows?

**Weber:** Well, I could get to the entire audience much more easily during come-in. I mean, because it's one ring. It was a smaller show. And I took my same routines over there. You didn't have to work as hard; you didn't have to work as fast, AND I think the audience at Kelly Miller was happier than the audience that we had assembled for shows on the five-ring show, Carson & Barnes, in those days.

**Q:** Why was that?

**Weber:** Because everybody had a prime seat around the only area that there was any entertainment in. They weren't scattered over a football field. And there was that gimmick, where when the public came in to the Carson & Barnes tent, the general admission public were not able to take a left and go down on the back track where the music stand and the back door for the performers was and take a bleacher seat. They were forced to walk all around the tent, which meant the front track, going by the very best seats in the house—president's box reserves, and the ticket booth for those upgrades. I mean as old as the circus in America is, there was a chance to upgrade seats. You had to walk by those, kind of drool over how marvelously central and comfortable those seats were, and then come around.

**Q:** This was which show?

**Weber:** Carson & Barnes was huge. But when you came into the tent for Kelly Miller all the seats were around what obviously was going to be the one performance site. You weren't strung out all over this long, long field. And I think

they had; we knew, we talked about it among ourselves—performers—that there was disgruntled public. And everybody knew that, that it was hard to find a good seat without paying more money at Carson & Barnes.

**Q:** Of course, Carson & Barnes—the Miller-Byrd family—had a big stake, a large stake, in Kelly Miller, its sister circus. Yet tell me about the difference in ownership. Tell me how David Rawls ran his show.

**Weber:** Well, I personally thought that David was more distant from me and the personnel of the show—performers anyway—than the Byrd-Miller family. I was always seeing Barbara, Geary (Byrd) and, when he was with us, D.R. I can't remember that as vividly with David.

**Q:** And so what do you think were the strengths, if any, of David's management of that show?

**Weber:** Well, David had, in the Perez family, a history of people who were related to each other and who were very related to all the details of the logistics of that show. Both shows logically were to die for. I mean, amazing, absolutely amazing. Geary Byrd, I think, had done logistics for the military; I'm not too sure of that. But he really knew how to move such an entity. And I think because of the history and the experience of the Perez family the same was true on Kelly Miller. It moved very, very effectively. I'm not sure—you know, this is all guesswork from a lowly clown—but I'm not sure that Kelly Miller didn't have, unto this day, didn't have a more effective front end, because we had really good crowds, most of the time.

Now once in a while Popcorn and I would joke that it felt like we were on a grind show, because there would be three performances in a day, and the total attendance would be less than 150. It was really, you felt you were going into a sideshow and eating fire a million times a day because of whoever was there. And that happened because of those pre-sales arrangements for charity. You know, they'd buy out the (performance) and then they wouldn't distribute them to the public. A given organization would buy a whole bunch of tickets for charity and then not get them distributed effectively. That old business of, you know, if you don't pay for it you don't value it. And so free tickets didn't necessarily mean that people were going to get up, get out of their houses and go attend the performance. I guess that's what was happening.

**Q:** What differences, if any, did you notice between the towns that Carson & Barnes and Kelly Miller played?

**Weber:** I was never on top of it enough to make an in-

telligent answer; you'd have to be able to compare sizes of towns at all. Because, as you know, no one could remember where they were yesterday. You went from arrow to arrow and field to field and parking lot to parking lot. And the other thing you already know is all of the smaller towns in this country, especially on the outskirts where there's space enough to put up a tent, look exactly the same. Walmart, Subway—all of the chain operations are lined up as you go into town, so unless you have time to explore you never get a sense of the history of the community and the tenor of the population. And I never investigated the size of a town. If we came into a really big city, you knew that because you moved at a different time of day or maybe, God forbid, the night before to avoid the traffic or earlier to avoid school buses or whatever. But most of the time, man, you just knew a field and took your chances with who showed up at show time.

**Q:** I'm generalizing here, but a lot of circus fans idealize circus life, that it's something they would like to do. But



*David Rawls on the Kelly Miller show*

Sayre Collection, courtesy of the Florida State University Libraries, Special Collections and Archives

what was, to you, the reality of circus life both good and bad?

**Weber:** The best part of it all, for me—and I was kind of a freak in the sense that I came from a very unusual background; I had owned a circus; it was an unusual circus in that it was a ministry of a very strict order in the Roman Catholic Church. So my experience perhaps isn't typical. But for me my existence day to day was for what happened in the tent during the performance. That was the height of my experience and where my pulse increased, and I think I was healthiest. As far as what happened in the backyard in most of your time, which was not performing, you learned for survival sake to routinize everything—when you sleep, when you eat, when you visit. And I've got to say that the community life on those shows was a bit hit and miss, because everybody was pretty busy, and you were tired. You were always fighting fatigue. Some of that fatigue came from boredom, doing the same thing the same way day in and day out, and as a man of the theater, I knew I had to somehow trick myself to making this fresh because these people had never seen me, or this before. You learn that as an actor or you die, and so I kind of had that going for me.

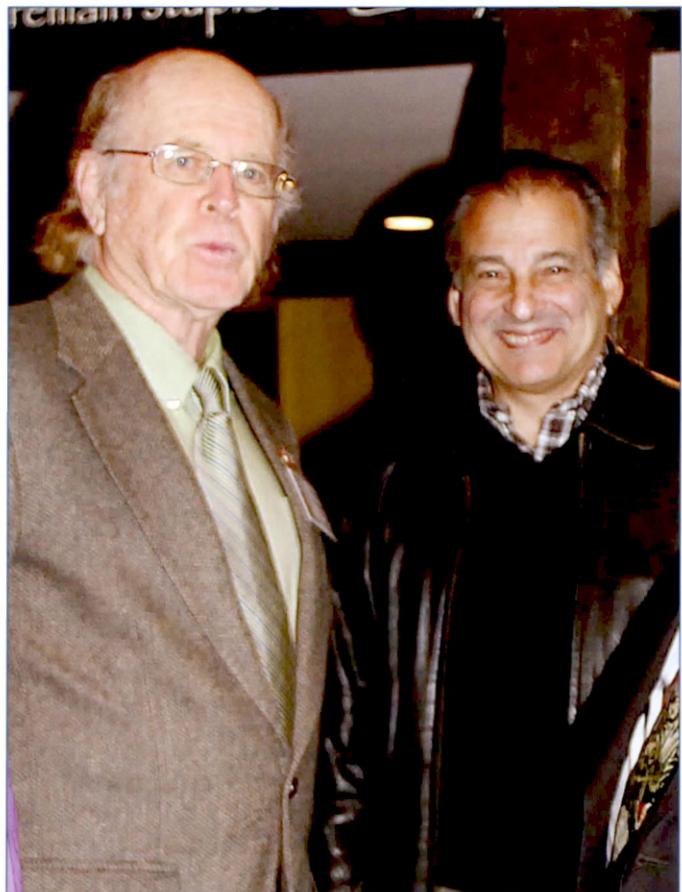
A strange thing on the Hugo shows—and I suppose it could have been the same other places—was that the folks who knew how to speak English were in the animal department. The commands had to be given in English. And so I befriended folks in the animal department more than others—just because of language. Although I learned some Spanish and I learned above all to respect everybody responsible for making the performance space possible for me. I have high, high respect for circus workmen. And so that was a factor. And there were jokes. I was nicknamed by the Hispanics very early on as "Cheese Face," because I was all white, and they called me that. Cara de queso in Spanish. And so even today, when I recognize a butcher on Kelly Miller that I once worked with, maybe over on Carson & Barnes, all I have to say is that clown name and immediately they know who I am, or remember who I am. And some of them—performers, Hispanic performers—became very close friends.

**Q:** And for the sake of time, how long were you on Kelly Miller, when and how did you leave, and what happened to Nick Weber after that?

**Weber:** I was on Kelly Miller in '98. And I began to get migraines. I knew something was wrong. To this day I don't know what. I was talking always with my pal, Popcorn. And I phoned my friend who had helped me with my

circus, was on the first national tour, Carlo Pellegrini, and I told him about it. I was getting pretty concerned. And he said, "I think what you need to do is leave that circus, and you need to come here to Nyack, New York, and stay with me and write the three one-man shows that you've been contemplating." And I said, "OK. Let me think about that." So another alum of our show, who was in Maryland at the time, said, "I can make it happen. I have a car I can loan you so that you can physically leave with your stuff and store it at my house, go up to Nyack so that you can eventually retrieve your truck from Hugo and then come down and get your stuff." So the logistics were there. Popcorn told me how to do it without too much sensation from other show folk, but there was no way I was going to leave, you know, blow the show or anything like that. I went to David and I told him. And word came to me that I should talk to his parents [Harry and Mary Rawls]. Before I left they wanted to talk with me. And it was very sad. And they were all kind and humane to me.

Q: And so how far into the season...?



Nick Weber and Carlo Pellegrini at the 2013 CFA banquet

by Janet Sopelak

Weber: It was May; it was the end of May. We had a three-day stand in Frederick, Maryland. So I worked through to the last day and did the Sunday shows. And the car was there, but Popcorn said, "Now, avoid sensation. Pack this in the middle of the night. Load it up in the middle of the night so people aren't nosy." That's how I left, and it was bittersweet, believe me.

Q: Were you only on Kelly Miller part of that one season?

Weber: That's right, only part of one.

Q: Approximately how long?

Weber: I guess we opened in March.

Q: So you went to Nyack, and did you write your plays?

Weber: Yes. I wrote a show called *And Jesus Laughed*. I was upset that the shortest verse in the Bible was "And Jesus wept." I cannot believe that Jesus didn't laugh a lot. So I wrote that. Then I wrote another show, *Shakespeare Just for Fun*. And then I shaped up one I had already written during winter in Hugo on the late-Jesuit poet Girard Manley Hopkins. And it was called *An Evening with Girard Manley Hopkins*. And I had already toured that during the wintertime. So those three shows I developed in Nyack. I developed them and rehearsed them in the very hall where Carlo Pellegrini has his Amazing Grace Circus! studios and toured those all over the United States for three years.

Then I decided one time [that] I would like to get back into high school teaching theater arts. I came to Milwaukee with the Shakespeare show that I did with my former student of 40 years ago from San Francisco. He was my stage manager. And I told him and his wife that I had just interviewed for a high school building a new theater in Phoenix. And they looked at each other kind of funny. And I said, "What's the matter? You're too old to be flirting with each other. What are you thinking?" His wife was president of a Catholic girls' school in Milwaukee, and he said, "We just broke ground for a \$3½ million theater here in Milwaukee, and we have no one to run it." And that got me from Nyack to where I now live in Milwaukee.

Q: Without getting maudlin, is there any way you can express how the circus and the circus community has shaped your life?

Weber: The circus and the circus community. Yes. The circus by its nature is an extremely earthy—and in both of

those challenging—set of symbols that I resonated with as an artist in the theater. It was there, of course, from the time I was a child, and I didn't know it. I am really, really slow at putting things together. Until I retired in '07, I didn't have any idea about how ritualistic the circus really is. The circus is a ceremony. I was fortunate enough to find my priestly side for all of those years in a circus ring. And in entertaining people as engaging what I identified as the power of Holy Spirit. That's what fired me and allowed me to not only value my art but the people my art served. That also was, in effect, on commercial circuses after I liquidated my own. I feel very strongly that there's a connection in our culture between the rituals that we espouse and that serve us. We need to find in the circus the very core values and movements and symbols that we're using in the theater and in the sanctuary to reflect back to us the great privilege it is to be human. And in that I think we've got a huge area for growth, especially growth towards one another, rather than away from one another. I think we always will have theater, sanctuary and circus because we need to come together so that those symbols can be placed for us by professionals that elevate us and that expand us, whether we call that growth of soul or spirit or whatever. We're bigger because of those rituals and we can learn, the rituals can learn from one another.

Q: What are these symbols that you're talking about?

Weber: The symbols are, basically, anything that reflects that we're more than what we think we are usually. That you and I are connected through our meal, or that we're connected through laughter and awe. Awe when we watch folks dispense with gravity, risk their lives even to illustrate our attempt at flying in the circus. More, more, more than we are. And then the clown, who's closer to us, succumbs to gravity [and] willingly reminds us that it's OK if our pants fall off. Those kinds of things we resonate with. We all laugh. We all, together, circle around these symbols, gasp and respect. As a result we come away from the symbols of movement, word, and emotion that the actors, performers or priests put in front of us over issues in life that, yes, we experience. We know that they relate to that profound story no matter who our prophet may have been; it might have been Abraham or Mohammed, or Jesus. That prophet has shared what we're sharing and cared for us because the prophet teaches us that we are part of a huge, huge whole oneness. That goes on in church with word and sign, maybe a meal. Maybe it's done with music, or maybe a flame with water, understood to communicate something like grace or participation in the divine. I think the same thing is going on—although we don't use divine, grace and all of that—in the theater and in the circus. And the more that we can accept those possibilities of power, I call them, I think the stronger we will make those rituals, including the circus. The circus is a holy enterprise. **Bw**



Elephant in spec wardrobe on the Carson & Barnes circus, circa 1995

courtesy of Robert Cox, via Buckles Blog

# COOK TENT OF A BIG CIRCUS.

Restaurant That Feeds Three  
Hundred People Three  
Times a Day.

## MOST AMAZING FEATURE

TASTES OF ALL NATIONS MUST BE  
SATISFIED.

Many and Very Strong Appetites—  
Oriental Love of Pepper—Orientals at Table—Freaks at Their Evening Meal—How the Circus Tent is Managed.

(Written for The Herald.)

BY CLEVELAND MOFFETT.

(Copyrighted, 1895, by S. S. McClure,  
Limited.)

One of the most amazing features of the circus in these days is the cook tent, where 700 people sit down to three meals daily and enjoy food as well cooked, of as good quality, and as promptly served as at any ordinary hotel. At 6 o'clock each morning of the circus season the sixty-five waiters and employees of the cook tent are ready to serve nearly a thousand people with three kinds of meat—usually steaks, chops and bacon—along with hot rolls, wheat cakes, coffee and genuine rich cream. It seems incredible that this very satisfactory meal has been made on what was two hours before, a bare field, and that three hours before the twelve long tables, the 16-foot range, the 6,000 dishes, the huge urns for tea and coffee, the broiler five feet by two, on which fifty steaks can be cooked in two minutes—all the utensils for cooking and eating,

Originally published in the Salt Lake Herald on July 21, 1895, this piece would have been both an interesting behind the scenes look at one of the most critical logistical aspects of the Barnum & Bailey show—the cookhouse—and a teaser to entice audiences to come see the strange and exotic people of other lands, whose curious eating habits are herein elucidated.

## Cook Tent of a Big Circus

Restaurant That Feeds Three Hundred  
People Three Times a Day.

*Most Amazing Feature*  
**Tastes of all nations  
must be satisfied.**

Many and Very Strong Appetites—  
Oriental Love of Pepper—Orientals at Table—Freaks at Their Evening Meal—How the Circus Tent is Managed.

by Cleveland Moffett

One of the most amazing features of the circus in these days is the cook tent, where 700 people sit down to three meals daily and enjoy food as well cooked, of as good quality, and as promptly served as at any ordinary hotel. At 6 o'clock each morning of the circus season the sixty-five waiters and employees of the cook tent are ready to serve nearly a thousand people with three kinds of meat—usually steaks, chops and bacon—along with hot rolls, wheat cakes, coffee and genuine rich cream. It seems incredible that this very satisfactory meal has been made on what was two hours before, a bare field, and that three hours before the twelve long tables, the 16-foot range, the 6,000 dishes, the huge urns for tea and coffee, the broiler five feet by two, on which fifty steaks can be cooked in two minutes—all the utensils for cooking and eating, in short, including the tent itself 168 feet by 55 feet, were securely packed in boxes and wagons on a train two miles distant. Here is a specimen of the ordinary bill of fare for dinner:

SOUP	
	Scotch Mutton Broth
FISH	
	Kennebeck Salmon, Lake Trout
ENTREES	
Irish Stew	Small Onions
Braised Beef	Smoked Shoulder
Potatoes	Cabbage
Boiled Leg of Mutton	Onion Sauce
ROASTS	
Prime Rib Roast	
Spring Duck	Dressing
Mutton	Currant Jelly
Leg of Veal	Brown Potatoes
Potted Pork Loin	Cabbage
DESSERT	
Metropolitan Pudding	Hard Sauce
Tea	Coffee

## Many and Very Strong Appetites to Satisfy

Four tables, each sixty feet long accommodate the canvas men, railroad men, grooms, drivers, elephant men, animal men, wardrobe men, ringstock men, blacksmiths, harnessmakers, wagon greasers, carpenters, who are the laborers of the circus, and whose appetites are enormous. Each of these 300 men will average three or four cups of coffee at a meal, and no matter how expensive the bill of fare may be their usual order is a "full house," that is everything there is, and they frequently repeat the order two or three times. It is not an uncommon occurrence for a circus laborer, in the course of a single meal, to drink ten cups of coffee or eat a dozen ears of corn.

*Charles Andress image of the Barnum & Bailey dining tent set for July 4, 1904*

Circus World Museum

And this is only one section of the cook tent, for on the other side of the main entrances are drawn up four other tables, accommodating fifty persons each, where the acrobats, clowns, dime museum freaks, musicians, tight-rope performers, jugglers and other celebrities are busy with knives and forks. Parallel with these tables in the farther corner are two others, where the Congress of Nations international costumes, the Arabs, Nepalese, Klings, Dahomeans, East Indians, Javanese, and a score of others from all parts of Asia and Africa, men, women and children, are eating in their own peculiar way, which is saying much.

Facing the main entrance, ten cooks are busy behind a well-built wooden counter carving meats, serving vegetables and other ways supplying the forty waiters who, with the orthodox white aprons, hurry back and forth serving the hungry crowd and doing it so quickly and with so little confusion that the meal is finished and the tent is cleared within an hour. In that time 500 pounds of the best meat has been cooked and served and about 2,000 cups of coffee have been emptied. Throughout the season the employees of a large circus consume every day an average of 1,800 pounds of meat, 600 pounds of bread, 83 pounds of coffee, 95 pounds of butter, 12 gallons of pure cream, 400 gallons of milk, and 12 bushels of potatoes. These are only the chief items, vegetables, fruits, eggs, etc. being also served in large quantities. The meals are received daily by consignment from Chicago, Cleveland, Philadelphia, New York, Boston and the nearest large city.





*Charles Andress image of the Barnum & Bailey dining tent set for July 4, 1904*

Circus World Museum

### How the Cook Tent Is Managed

The head of probably the largest of all circus cook tents is a pleasant faced young German named Kohl, who has been with the circus for eleven years, and by his own energies and abilities, raised himself from the position of a common dish washer at \$2 a week. There are many such instances in the circus, for in no other organization does a man find his right level more certainly than in this most severe of all communities, where each must bear his own burden or stand forth conspicuous as a laggard. When Mr. Kohl first took charge of a cook tent, the limit of its capacity was believed to be 200 persons. Now they feed 1,000 without the slightest difficulty. Mr. Kohl, with his partner Mr. Klein, assumes all the financial risks in feeding the circus people, charging them at the rate of 20 cents a head per meal, and settling all bills daily. A

new account is opened every morning and closed every night. A system of meal tickets has been introduced for convenience and for a check on the number of those fed, as before this was adopted the workmen would smuggle in a dozen or so of their friends without detection and that number of meals would be furnished without payment.

One of the first changes Mr. Kohl brought about was the providing of the best meat in the market instead of using cheaper quality. He found this an economy instead of an expense as previously hungry workmen had been accustomed to throw under the table a tough steak or other meat that did not please them and call for a fresh order which the caterer was obliged to serve according to contract. By giving the men the best meat, it was found that the savings in waste more than made up for the increased price per pound. Another result was that while, a few years ago, only the working men of a



*Charles Andress image of the Barnum & Bailey dining tent set for July 4, 1904*

Circus World Museum



Charles Andress image of the Barnum & Bailey dining tent set for July 4, 1904

Circus World Museum

circus took their meals in the cook tent, the higher-priced people going to hotels, now everybody, including the managers of the show are willing and glad to eat on the grounds.

### The Cook Tent, a Restaurant for All Nations

Dinner is served at 11:30 so as to be over in time for the afternoon performance and the last meal of the day, the supper, begins at 3:30, when the Orientals are summoned from the menagerie tent for chou chou, the general word for eating although Arabs call it mungee.

It has been found necessary to pay special attention to these natives of foreign lands on account of the differences of their tastes and ways of eating. As there are no less than ninety-five individuals in this congress, and as very few of them speak or understand English, and as they furthermore con-

sider themselves personages of great importance and entitled to have prepared for them whatever dishes of articles of food they desire, it is evident that the waiters and mangers of the cook tent have here a difficult task before them. Imagine an unlettered Irish waiter, accustom to shouting out "ham and eggs" "pork and beans," etc., having to take an order from a Nepalese warrior hungry for pana stew or from an Algerian dancing-girl desiring kouskous: an Australian boomerang thrower eager for fried basel; a Kling young lady with a ring in her nose in a hurry for a plate of underdone lumboo: or a Cingalese maiden with a bath towel around her loins, who sighs for gambe. These are a few of the words used by these curious people as an equivalent for beef mutton, onions, rice, etc. and it is important that the waiters in the cook tent understand what they mean.



Charles Andress image of the Barnum & Bailey dining tent set for July 4, 1904

Circus World Museum

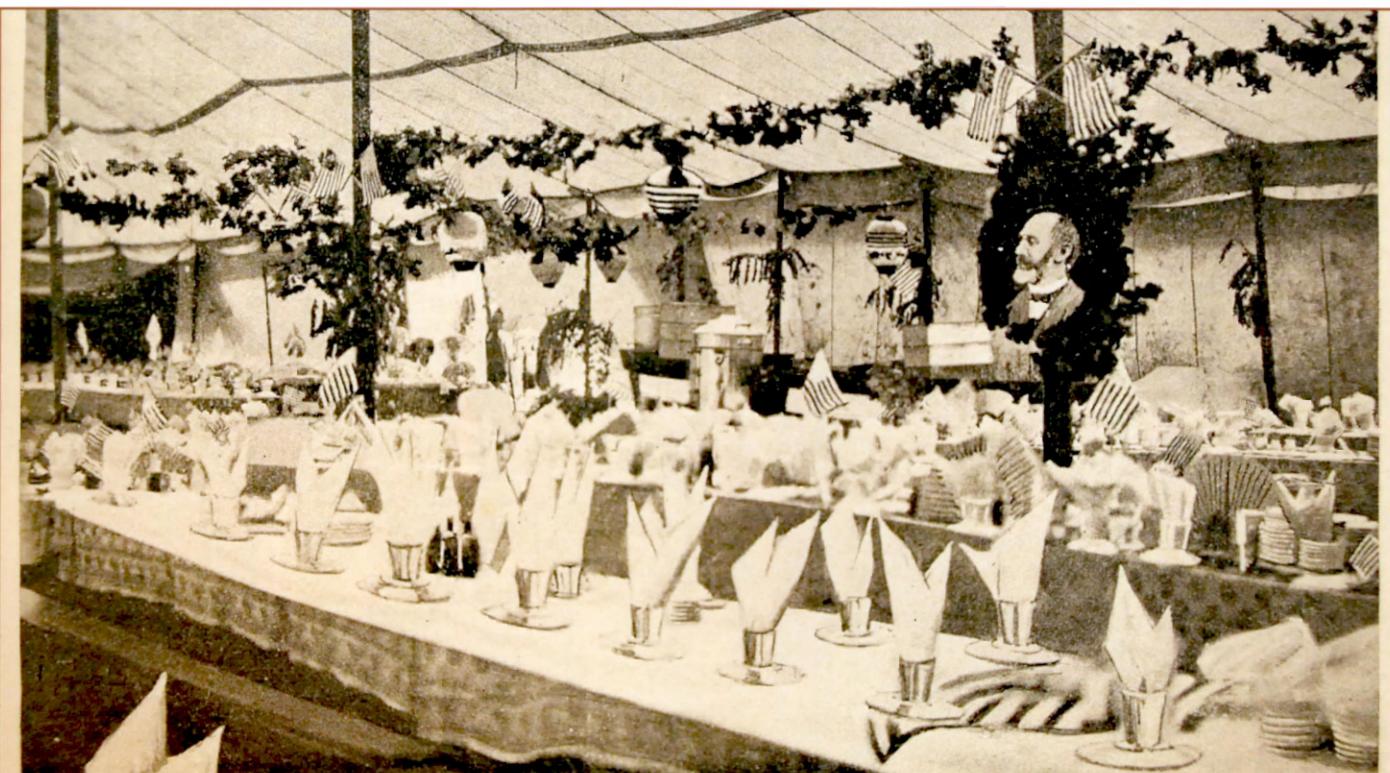
## What the Orientals Eat

Nor is that by any means the least of their troubles, for they must know exactly what each of these heathen groups will or will not eat. None of them, for instance, except a Malay girl with fingernails very long on one hand and very short on the other, and a renegade dervish will eat pork, which they all call babe, pronouncing the word with scornful tone and gesture. "Babee no good," they will all tell you. And the Nepalese and Klings extend their aversion to all kinds of meat except mutton and I will tell you in all seriousness, if you call the interpreter that the devil has his favorite habitation in beef. They all eat mutton except the Sikhs, who believe that food prepared by Christians is accursed, and would not on pain of their lives touch a morsel in the cook tent, nor eat anything prepared by other hands than their own. This curious prejudice caused the circus management much trouble at first, as the Sikhs simply refuse to taste of the dishes put before them, preferring to starve rather than be false to their creed. Annoyed and worried, one circus proprietor undertook to argue the question: but the spokesman for the Sikhs, a learned man, so it was said, and a philosopher in his own country, promptly took up the challenge, and put the ques-

tion fairly. If pious Americans would in cold blood make a meal upon their ancestors. Not seeing the connection, the proprietor said "no," whereupon the logical minded Sikh smiled and pointing to the platters of beef and ham said: "These are our ancestors, therefore we cannot eat them."

## How the Sikhs Live to Themselves

After this adroit application of the principle of the transmigration of souls, the Sikhs were given their own way and allowed to have a separate eating tent, where one would doubtless see many curious things could he peep through the close-drawn canvas. But even such curious intrusion soon ceased, for it was found that if so much as the shadow of a Christian fell upon the meal prepared by these strange people they would throw every particle away and begin once more at the beginning. It was discovered gradually that they used their own cooking utensils, pieces of battered silver brought from India and made perhaps by the hands of their forefathers. Also that they would never use forks or knives for cutting, but only their hands, managing the food very daintily with their long, brown fingers, as they squatted on the ground around a piece of carpet spread in the center. Chicken they



COOK TENT—MR. BAILEY'S BIRTHDAY.

Tables set for James Bailey's birthday and Fourth of July, from the 1896 Barnum & Bailey route book

Circus World Museum

would eat, killing the fowl by cutting its throat, and then skinning it and stewing it with curry, red pepper, onions, and salt. They were also fond of a kind of pancakes, using much "ghi," or lard. Inside their tent they placed no less than ten small bath tubs for use in ablutions, and with a coffee pot for a sprinkler, and they accompanied their eating with prayers, at least so one of the canvasmen, who claims to have seen them, reports.

### The Oriental Love of Pepper

All the East Indians in the circus eat quantities of red pepper, although never touching the black variety. They even go so far as to sprinkle red pepper on vegetables, fruit and bread. A favorite delicacy of theirs is prepared by hollowing out the core of an apple, stuffing the interior with red pepper, and covering the opening with the piece originally cut out. It is a fact that the congress of nations, at their two tables, required at each meal half a dozen saucers heaped with red pepper, which they take on their plates by the spoonful as we do sugar.

Very few of the Orientals will touch potatoes, but they all eat large quantities of rice which must be cooked in a certain way in order to satisfy them,

not in a mushy mess, but carefully steamed so that each kernel is perfect and separate. They are also fond of onions, and want them cooked with everything. A favorite Arab dish that has to be especially prepared for some of the Orientals, is made of mutton, rice, a paste-like maccarent brought from Egypt, and the inevitable red pepper. This is called "kous-kous." Another dish much appreciated by them is "goulalee," of which a steaming potfull has to be made every day for dinner and supper. "Goulalee" is a stew of mutton, onions, cabbage, curry powder, red pepper and salt. I tried it one day myself, and found it excellent.

### The Orientals at Table

Every afternoon at 4 o'clock, while the show in the big ring is at its height, all these dark-skinned people are enjoying their various dishes in their corner of the cook tent. They do not sit altogether along in a line, but separated in little groups that are congenial for it is found that there is danger of trouble between various races, the women being jealous of each other, and the men disposed to fight. "Big Dan," as the waiters called a Kling chieftain, had to be separated from "Kelly," the largest of the boomerang throwers, while a



Klein and Kohl managed the Deux K cookhouse, image from the 1896 Barnum & Bailey route book

Circus World Museum

Dahomean woman, christened "Snuff Box Kate," had to be placed as far as possible from the fat Esquimo woman, the grandmother of little Columbia Palmer. Thus arranged, the Oriental groups eating alone in the cook tent every afternoon, presents a most picturesque appearance. One of the women or men in each group has almost invariably prepared some queer native dish with her own hands, and is offering this to her friends with great pride. Mr. Kohl found it best to allow them this privilege, and scarcely a day passes but some of the Orientals ask for eggs, onions, mutton, a chicken, or something else which, with mysterious additions of his own, he deftly transforms into dishes that would puzzle a Parisian chef to analyze. These little surprises brighten all eyes and set their tongues going, so that there is a perfect babble of talk and laughter.

A Singalese man with a comb in his black hair, and wearing a skirt like a woman, is offering a mixture that smells of garlic to the women of his group, these infer having no combs in their hair. At the Arab table, the women dressed in red and gold, with many beads and spangles, with white veils over their black hair and glittering ornaments, look for all the world as if they had just stepped out of some Sultan's harem, nor would anyone suspect that one of them was really an Irish girl by birth, who fell in love some years ago with one of the Arabs, followed him to his country, learned the native's ways and language, and became to all

intents and purposes an Arab herself, so that she now speaks English with an accent. Yet so it is, and between her and the Kabyl women on the right there exists a constant feud which makes it necessary to keep the table between them. In this group is also the bright-faced, lithe-limbed Mouni, the graceful Algerian dancing girl, whose movements are a poem.

Now the meal is drawing to its close and a comely Burmese woman passes out slipping a piece of ice down the neck of the tally-keeper at the door, for she is full of mischief. Then comes the Caucasian Princess, who rides standing in the saddle and speaks all the languages of Europe, graceful in spite of the trousers she wears and the high black boots. After her comes the Esquimaux group, wearing home made furs, though the sun is boiling hot, and the Javanese who eat quite on the American plan and look down on the other Orientals as uncivilized. The Malay girl comes next, red-eyed with weeping for a discharged lover but hugging a cotton umbrella which she carries always regardless of the weather. It is a remarkable fact that one of the first investments made by these people in America is to buy an umbrella, which seems to excite their admiration more than anything else in our western civilization. These precious umbrellas they keep with them always, even when they sleep. Never was umbrella called upon to do so much strange service as in giving dignity to a brown-skinned



A Pete Mardo photo of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Cookhouse, circa 1928

Circus World Museum

bare-headed Sikh damsel with eight rings in each ear and three in her nose and a dozen yards of cotton cloth wound round her by way of costume.

And now an equally strange scene is being enacted at the opposite side of the cook tent where the company of "freaks" from the side show are beginning their evening meal, for they never eat until the Congress of Nations has finished. Here comes the bearded lady, with a yellow covered novel in her hand, and some fine diamonds on her fingers. She is quite an intelligent person, and interesting to talk to after you have grown accustomed to the long silken hair that covers her face. Next, Jo-Jo comes in wearing a black veil all around his head to guard him against unwelcome remarks from outsiders, for he is the ugly dog-faced boy, unpleasant to look upon. Removing his veil Jo-Jo takes his place next to the man who has no arms, who is evidently hungry, and is feeding himself rapidly and dexterously with his two bare feet, lifted easily above the table, as has become natural for him from long habit. Strange to see him reach for the salt and pepper, sprinkle them on his meat, and then taking knife and fork between his toes, go on with his meal serenely. A little farther down the line sits the snake charmer munching green corn and carrying on an animated conversation with Laloo, he who bears two bodies in one, his own and that of a little sister whose head was left by some strange fate inside his breast, her body hang-

ing out. Then there is the human ape, with body of huge strength, and low receding forehead. There are also the midgets, poor little men, carried in and out by their manager, who never leaves them. Midgets are a little out of style now so Mr. Hager the manager of the sideshow tells me. The public is weary of giants and fat women. What is wanted now are "freaks" and for them the management will pay generously. It is enough to discourage an ordinary clerk or bookkeeper at \$15 or \$20 a week with being a normal, well formed man to learn that this poor wretch Jo-Jo draws \$20 a week for merely standing in the circus of monstrosities, while Laloo, with his velvet clothes and languid air, is paid \$275 a week and all expenses. All these and others eat regularly in the cook tent, and usually with hearty appetite.

The last meal of the day begins at 3:30 p.m., the Orientals eating first. By 5 o'clock their tables are gone. By 5:30 the three rows of tables for the circus laborers are gone. The dishes are all packed, the boards and boxes loaded on the wagons. At 6 o'clock the "freaks" are still eating, but the rest of the big tent shows only bare ground. By 6:45 everything is packed and loaded, even the tent has disappeared, and the three cook tent wagons, weighing six or eight tons each, stand waiting, the six-horse teams that will presently haul them away to the circus train. Thus is a great restaurant packed away in boxes every twenty-four hours. **BW**



Charles Andress image of the Barnum & Bailey dining tent set for July 4, 1904

Circus World Museum

# Would You Expect to Find Heroes Among These Men?

They are plain, common workers; but they drive themselves to the point of exhaustion, and even risk their lives, that you may not miss a pleasure which has been promised you

*First published in The American Magazine, June 1921*

*by Courtney Ryley Cooper*

WHEN the average man braces up to meet a bit of tough luck, he secretly thinks that he is "some guy." But I want to say that if you never have been connected with a circus, you don't know the meaning of the word Trouble. And if you want to see unadulterated and inexhaustible grit, you won't find a better brand of it anywhere than you'll find in the circus.

I'm not talking about the star performers, either. I am talking of the folks you probably would call roughnecks. Plain, common men they are. But with them, courage, determination, and devotion to duty don't get any chance to rust for lack of exercise.

Above, Bill Curtis, lot superintendent, bosses the job of setting up and taking down the circus. He has been offered ten times his present salary to go into some other business. But he refuses, because, as he says, he likes "to do the impossible," and the circus keeps him busy doing it.

Right, Bill Curtis and his crew raising the Sells-Floto center poles in 1913

courtesy of Circus World Museum



A circus is a fighting machine; a place of grueling work, which begins in the gray of dawn and does not cease until the last torch, down at the railroad yards, has been extinguished. It is a thing which fights constantly for its very life against the demons of accident, of fire and flood and storm; a driving, dogged, almost desperate thing, which forces its way forward by the sheer grit and determination of the men and women who make it; men and women who can laugh in the face of fatigue, of discomfort, of pain,

and even in the leering features of Death itself.

That's a circus!

It is no place for a grouch; no place for the man who cannot fight on when everything is against him; when the rain is pouring and the circus lot is hip deep in mud; even when the great cars of the circus train are piled in the ditch and the groans of human beings mingle with the screeching of hurt and frightened animals.

Far ahead, plastered on barns and billboards, are the glowing posters which promise that, "rain or shine," the show "will positively appear." It is the ethics of the circus that these promises shall be kept. Whatever happens, the show must go on!

If you were hunting for "hero stuff," it would not occur to you



to look for it on the circus lot, would it? Well, I want to tell you a few things that may change your mind:

There was the night we closed the season at Fort Worth, Texas, for instance. A "norther" was cutting through the canvas at a fifty-mile clip, bearing a mist which froze as it struck, transforming the great circus into a thing of stiff, sheeted ice.

It covered the tents and glazed the wagons, while the performers huddled around a smokey wood fire in the dressing tents and the bandmen had to take turns at playing, because their hands were so stiff with cold.

Only a few scores of overcoated persons were huddled on the spectators' benches, in a great expanse that would seat ten thousand; and most of them had come in on passes. Yet the show went on! Icicles hung from the eaves of the tents and the temperature inside was at freezing. But still the band played, the shivering clowns made their jokes, the thinly-clad aerialists shot from one trapeze to another—even though the mist had coated the bars of the aerials themselves with ice and Death chased every leap.

Then came the struggle to load. The animal cages, covered with canvas side walls, and each with a double bedding of straw to protect the poor beasts, had been hauled to the train. The menagerie "top"—as the circus tents are called—dropped to the ground, while frenzied men,

their clothes frozen stiff through hours of exposure to the icy, mist-laden wind, struggled to roll it into some sort of shape in which it could be loaded.

But the great boardlike mass could not be folded; and the "spools"—those tremendous reels on which the circus canvas is rolled—must be saved for the more valuable "big top" or main tent. There was nothing to be done, except to abandon the



*Harry Atwell captured this image of the crew raising the RBBB big top king pole, circa 1930*

courtesy of Circus World Museum

menagerie top—leave it behind to be sold as junk.

The hours' dragged on. The circus men, accustomed to warm weather and therefore lightly clothed—except for the ice that had frozen on their garments—were reaching the breaking point. Heat of some kind was absolutely necessary. So the wooden platforms and stages used in the show were brought out, saturated with gasoline, and set on fire. With the help of this warmth the loading slowly progressed.

Then the voice of Bill Curtis, lot superintendent, sounded, com-

pelling and vibrant above the shrill of the wind and the rattle of sleet against the frozen grass.

"Six good men! Shake a leg, now! Six good men who ain't afraid to die!"

In the light of a gasoline flare the half dozen figures gathered, humped and shivering and waiting. The superintendent looked them over, one by one. Then he barked:

"Well! Let's see a grin on your faces! I don't want any man who can't grin!"

There was a moment of uncertainty. Grins and the risk of death are not easily coupled. A long wait, then a rumbling laugh. It was Fullhouse, gangly, long-legged Fullhouse, who could eat more eggs, drink more coffee, cram more bread than any other man who invaded the circus cookhouse. Fullhouse had found a laugh—and the other men joined him.

"**B**OYS" said Bill Curtis quietly, I ain't kidding you. Those center poles have got all the weight they can stand now. When the fall guys are released and the canvas drops, that weight's liable to break every pole. And if that happens, somebody's going to get killed. Anybody want to back out? Speak out now!"

He waited. There was no word of weakening. Bill swung the big torch into position to light the interior of the big top.

"All right!" he ordered brusquely. "Each man to a center pole! Don't let the fall guys go until



*Hook rope teams moving a wagon through a muddy Sells-Floot lot, circa 1913-1917*

courtesy of Circus World Museum

I give the order. Then turn 'em loose, and run to beat hell!"

The shadowy forms went forward. One by one, Bill checked them at their stations. Out of the dimness beneath that stretch of ice-coated danger, the answers came clear and resonant. The lungs of Bill Curtis filled to their capacity. Then out burst the bawling order:

"Let go!"

Scurrying forms, an awful instant of waiting while the poles creaked with the tremendous weight, as the canvas sagged downward. Then, while Bill's heart began to beat again, the big, sleety mass sank to the ground, and six men ran forth to safety.

The poles had held. Six men had gambled with death, and won. Ten minutes later, it was forgotten in a new struggle, as the spool wagons came forward and workmen strove to make them

cope with loads which tripled in size and weight their usual capacity.

And don't think that the show clowns are the only ones who can make money by causing laughter around "the white tops." There are times when laughs are scarce, when laughs can mean salvation. For instance, there was the time at Fort Madison, Iowa, when a cloudburst came during the performance.

Again it was Bill Curtis that bossed the gang on a lot knee deep in water, while a panicky audience waded toward the paved streets. Every inch of canvas belied with the weight of the water. In their efforts to save the whole great tissue from ruin, men with shotguns banged away at the bulging "pockets" above, so that part of the great mass of water could run through the holes thus made and so relieve the strain on center poles, already taxed far

beyond their strength.

Here and there about the lot, thirty, or even forty, horses were hook-rope to the big wagons, in the battle to move them. Hour after hour the struggle went on, the tragedy of a circus in the mud—and there are few enemies more feared than mud is in the tented world. Horses went to their bellies in the mire, and stuck there, helpless and gasping, while grim-faced men, their hearts aching at the pain they caused, hitched other horses to them and dragged them bodily forth.

But only the empty wagons had been dragged out. The circus still was on the lot, with only one method of salvation: It must be carried off by hand! Wet, mud-caked, tired, the men tried their best to obey the commands which streamed from the lips of Bill Curtis. But the thing was minute by minute becoming impossible.

From a hastily improvised

cookhouse, perched on a half-dry hammock, came cans of steaming coffee. You may not know it, but whisky was barred from the big circuses long before the Prohibition Act. The hot stimulant aided efforts for a while. Then its effects died.

"Fullhouse!" shouted Bill Curtis.

Once again, as at Fort Worth, the gangly roughneck was slated for the position of lifesaver. Muddy, tired, bedraggled, he pulled his way through the mire and faced the superintendent. That person jammed a hand into a pocket.

"How big does five dollars look to you?"

"Big as the moon!"

"Good! ... Cokehead!"

Bill Curtis called a stubby, funny-faced negro to him, and asked him the same question. Then a five-dollar bill traveled into the hands of each of the men.

"I want you two to work together. Get where the gang seems

the most tired. Start laughing and joking the minute you get there—and keep at it! When you've laughed up that money there's more waiting! Now, hop to it!"

**T**HE value of a laugh! A circus was in the mud. Fifteen hours away were boys and girls and men and women—waiting for the glitter and sparkle of a parade, for the blaring of bands, the long lines of elephants, the steel-throated scream of the calliope. And the circus was in the mud, with fifty miles of railroading yet to be done, and the whole tremendous thing to be carried out of a flood by hand.

Out into the lines of dead-tired workmen went Cokehead and Fullhouse. The negro began to cackle, the white man to boom and rumble with forced laughter. For a time, the other workmen only stared. Then the foolishness of it all struck one more gifted with a sense of humor than the

others. He grinned. Soon he was laughing with the two "professionals." Another joined him—then another and another. Soon the whole line was laughing—nor could one tell the reason. Someone began to sing. Others joined him. Steadily the lines began to move, in machine-like rhythm, to the accompaniment of singing and laughter.

**A**ND at two o'clock the next morning a tired trainmaster raised his hand in signal to the railroad men that the trains were loaded at last; that laughter had done what cursing, or beating, or whisky, could not have done; that the show would go on, and that those who waited in the next town would not wait in vain. Thus men endured all under Bill Curtis. As for Bill himself—I saw him last summer, hobbling around the hippodrome track of the Hagenbeck-Wallace Shows, a cane aiding a leg which had been crippled more than a year. The



Standing water on the 1908 Hagenbeck-Wallace lot in Bucyrus, Ohio

courtesy of Circus World Museum

big frame was a bit gaunt from racking pain; the skin of the high-boned face was a trifle more tightly drawn than usual. But the genial old bark still was in the voice, and the quick straight smile on the lips.

"I got mine in the smash-up," he confided cheerily. "It was a little tough for a while; couldn't get around much. But even that jamboree couldn't stop us. The old trick's still moving!"

That "jamboree" was something which made you gasp in horror when you read about it: the wreck of the Hagenbeck-Wallace circus trains at Gary, Indiana, with a casualty list which consumed columns. As for Bill—

He was in the last car of the circus train when the speeding troop train crashed into it from the rear. Plowing through the splintered coach, the engine caught Bill on its cowcatcher and he lay there, unconscious, just beneath the front of the boiler, while the engine carried him on through its work of destruction. Another car was torn to kindling, another and another, and upon the engine which caused the destruction was the crumpled, limp form of Bill Curtis, lucky enough to receive, out of his wild ride of disaster, only an injured leg.

I SAW others about the circus that day; one or two with arms or legs missing, many who were scarred and weakened for life. But still they were with "the old op'ry," still working away that the show might go on.

You may think that Bill Curtis gives his time, strength, and devotion to the circus because he can't do anything else, or because he gets a fat salary, or is afraid

he couldn't find another job.

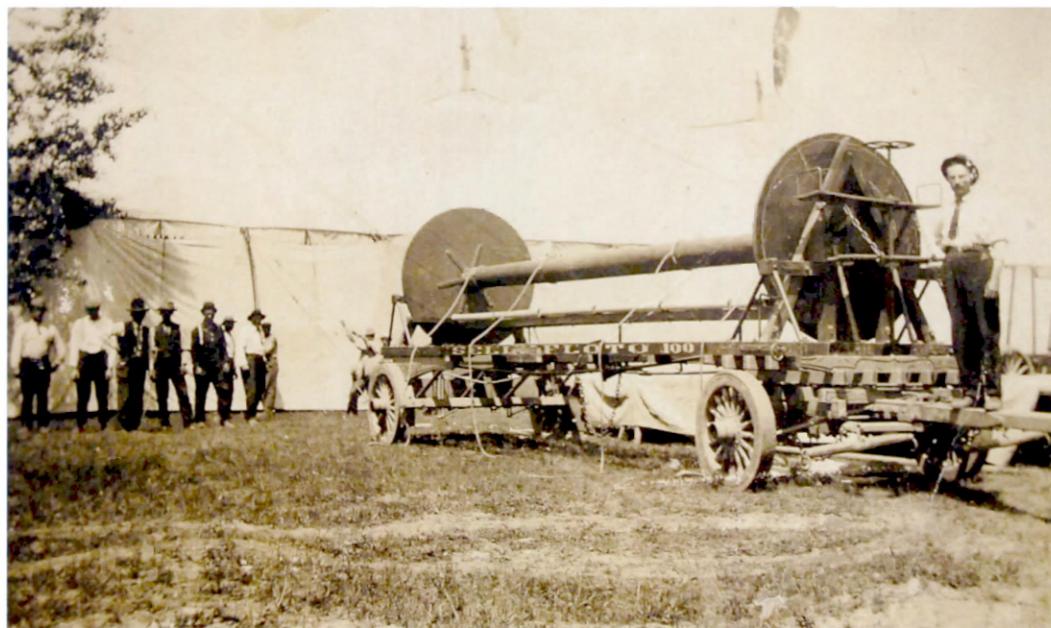
But many a big manufacturing firm has tried to hire Bill. He gets about \$75 a week on the circus—certainly not more than \$100—whereas his offers from outside have run far above \$15,000 a year.

Bill is the inventor of the "spool wagon" which carries the circus canvas, raises and lowers the poles, puts up the big tent almost by itself, and saves the work of forty men. He is the originator of the "chain system" of circus

model of the invention the next. Naturally, he is sought after everywhere. But does Bill listen to the siren call of other business and a soft job for life? Hardly!

"I'd miss the excitement," he says. "I'd feel kind of lost not to be studying the skies to figure out whether or not a blow's coming, or whether we're going to fight the rain and mud to get off the lot. I guess I'd just wither and die in a soft job."

"You see, a fellow stays in the circus game because of the spir-



Curtis with his canvas spool wagon on the 1913 Sells-Floto show

courtesy of Circus World Museum

seats, which can be set up without a single stake to hold them in place. He invented the Curtis stake driver, the Curtis "guy-rope tightener," and the Curtis "fool-proof wagon," which has saved many a man from injury at the unloading runs.

EVERYWHERE about the circus on which he works can be found the evidences of Bill Curtis's genius, of his inventions, for which he receives nothing. They "go with his salary." He is the type of inventor—the overnight kind—to whom you can give an order one day and receive a

it of combat that's in him. It's a life where you don't know what you're going up against from one day to the next. It means a lot to a fellow to know he can do the impossible. And, believe me! When you roll into a town at ten o'clock in the morning, get up your tents, feed six or seven hundred people, give a two-mile parade, put on two performances, and get away for your next town by midnight—well, you've run rings around impossibilities. It's a lot of satisfaction."

The circus world is full of Bills. That's why for one hundred and eighty days out of the year, the

great caravans grind away a mileage ranging from sixteen thousand to thirty thousand miles, through mud, rain, fire, flood, burning heat, storms, and other difficulties, rarely missing even a parade, and with less than a score of lost performances for the whole season.

**T**AKE the biggest dry-goods store in New York City. Imagine that store doing business until the last possible moment at night. Then, suddenly, it has to

master in the way of obstacles. Moving, moving, moving, the circus is ever fighting forward to the next stand. Long before the menagerie doors are open for the night performance, the horse tents, the tableau wagons, the cook-house, and blacksmith shop have been loaded and started on the on the torch-defined route to the "runs," the loading place in the railroad yards.

Perhaps you've noticed, when you came forth from the big show at night that something was



*The interior of the RBBB big top, circa 1930, with the forest of poles*

courtesy of Circus World Museum

move. The next day, in Philadelphia, whither it has been transported on trains of from thirty to ninety cars, that big store erects its own shelter, lays out its goods, opens its doors and is ready for business again; to say nothing of having erected its own restaurant, fed a thousand persons, and given a demonstration of its wares through the streets in the morning. Add to all this the handicaps of weather, of railroad tie-ups, of delays, of fire and accident, and you have a small idea of what it means to run a circus.

How is it done? By system—and by herculean grit that knows no

missing. The menagerie, tent and all, has vanished. The cages have been transported to the trains, placed aboard, and from one to three trains, carrying the cook-house, the parade paraphernalia, the tableaus, half of the executive staff, the same number of superintendents and straw bosses, the animals, and even a part of the list of the performers, are speeding on toward the next town.

It is only by such speed as this that the great thing can move. A circus will gamble with its very life and the lives of the persons who constitute its great family,

to make good on its promise of

**"Rain or Shine—Positive Appearance!"**

Late in the summer of 1915 I sat in the rickety caboose of a local freight train on a corkscrew railroad in a Western state. In all my railroading I never had struck rougher riding; it seemed as if the train must leave the rails—even at its "speed" of less than five miles an hour. I was ahead of my show and a week later, the long, heavily loaded trains of the circus must make this route.

Hunting up the engineer, I demanded:

"How in blazes are those two circus trains going to get over this road?"

"It's suicide, man!" he growled. "This road's on the hog. They haven't had a track-walker over it in three months, and there hasn't been a train heavier than ten cars on it in a year."

As soon as possible, I wired the general agent in Chicago:

Protect against almost certain wreck on Blank railroad. Worst road I ever saw. We're

bound for the ditch sure if we try to make it. Advise cancellation of towns on line.

And back came the answer:

Too late for cancellation. Folks are watching for us, and we've got to take the chance. Have insured on possible damages to train and paraphernalia. Will do everything possible to safeguard trains; but can't disappoint. We'll make the gamble.

**A**ND a week later, the circus train attempted that trip. In St. Louis, I got a telegram from the general agent:

Show wrecked, but luck was

with us. Ten flat cars went into the ditch, but no one was hurt and only one day lost. No animals in turn-over and everything salvaged. Damage about twenty thousand dollars.

There, I think, is typified the spirit of the big tops. Last year, one of the big shows had only two days more to go before the end of the season. Word came from Opelousas, Louisiana, that the danger of being mired was almost certain. And did the circus cancel its last two days and head for home? It did not! It accepted the danger of the elements.

It lost. Wagons were sunk in the mud so deep they could not see the wheels. Elephants, striving to rescue the great carriers, became panic-stricken and stampeded. The only meals served in two days were from a cook-house wagon, abandoned where it careened, hub deep in the mud. Horses, caught in quicksand, went over their heads, only to be dragged forth by hundreds of men, tugging at lariats thrown about the necks of the poor animals just before they went under.

Barnum & Bailey stake driving team

Astoria was a town built on stilts; its streets were planked affairs high above the sandy stretches which approach the Columbia River. There was no such thing as an easily accessible vacant lot in the whole town.

The elephants broke through the plankings and threatened a panic. There was no room for the menagerie; we left it on one of the planked streets, where anyone who cared to look upon

staff working at the hardest kind of day labor, that circus was carried on the lot by hand!

On from Astoria to Marshfield, Oregon, where a circus never had been seen before. Troubles again—with broken crossings, marshy spots on the haul to the lot, difficulties in obtaining water and in finding room for unloading the trains.

Everyone worked that day. Even the owner—and the mercantile



courtesy of Circus World Museum

**A**CIRCUS season begins in April. It ends in November. And from the beginning to the end, it is one constant struggle against every possible obstacle which Fate can devise. Let me tell you the story of just two months with one circus, which I joined late in September.

We decided to show Astoria, Oregon, where no big circus had made the attempt in years. As-

it could do so—free. No tents sheltered the performers; they dressed under the plankings of one of the streets, with canvas side walls hung about them. The main tent stood in a mass of sand through which one could barely flounder, twenty feet beneath the street surface of the town. And with every performer, every “butcher,” ticket seller, and even the members of the executive

agencies rate him at something like fourteen millions—stood at the front gate, taking tickets. A boy passed through an hour before the show began. Ten minutes later he came forth, while the owner, Harry Tammen, yelled at him: “Hey, kid! Coming back?”

The boy stared.

“Maybe.”

“But don’t you want to see the show?”

"Oh," the boy grinned. "I've saw it."

"You come with me, kid!" was Tammen's command, as he turned the ticket taking over to me. "Gosh! You don't even know what to look for in a circus!"

They went inside. Later, as the chariot racers careened around the rutty track, I saw them again, the millionaire owner and the wide-eyed kid, sitting high on the close-packed seats. That night I

Phoenix.

The first section was loaded, but still the train didn't start. I sought the reason—and found it in a crowd of men, struggling vainly to shut two escaped ostriches back into their cages. But the ostriches were fighting, in a duel to the death. Men beat at them, yelled at them, tried to rope them and pull them apart. In vain. Kicking and leaping, the ostriches were determined

show wagon, and the draft of the train's progress had done the rest. Miles from water, miles from aid. If that train moved on, with its consequent rush of air, it meant that the whole train would burn.

Men dragged forth the steel cables which were used to guy out the poles of the big top. Quickly the burning flat car was spotted. Men wrapped in wet canvas struggled forward against the heat to "lasso" the whole burning mass

with the cables. Out came the work elephants, their pulling harness slapping about their shoulders. One by one they were hooked to the cables. A moment of racking labor, then a crashing roar as the blazing car tumbled down the embankment. There we left it—ten thousand dollars' worth of lost effort, blazing away, as we went on, minus one side show, two parade wagons, and a flat car.

After that, a delayed train at San Antonio and a circus lot too small

for the show mattered little. Or the cloudburst at Bryant, the cold drizzles at Tyler and Sheridan, or even the day at Wichita Falls, with a gale blowing so strong that even to raise the big top meant disaster.

Then the trip home—but even then the difficulties did not cease. A spark in a horse car. Another fire—and strong men ready to risk death to save the best loved things of the circus—its horses. All this happened within two months. Every full circus season can tell treble that number of stories. [Bw]



Barnum & Bailey's Circus Fire, May 21, 1910, Schenectady, N.Y.—No. 8

Roughnecks work to put out a fire in the Barnum & Bailey big top in Schenectady, New York, 1910.  
courtesy of Circus World Museum

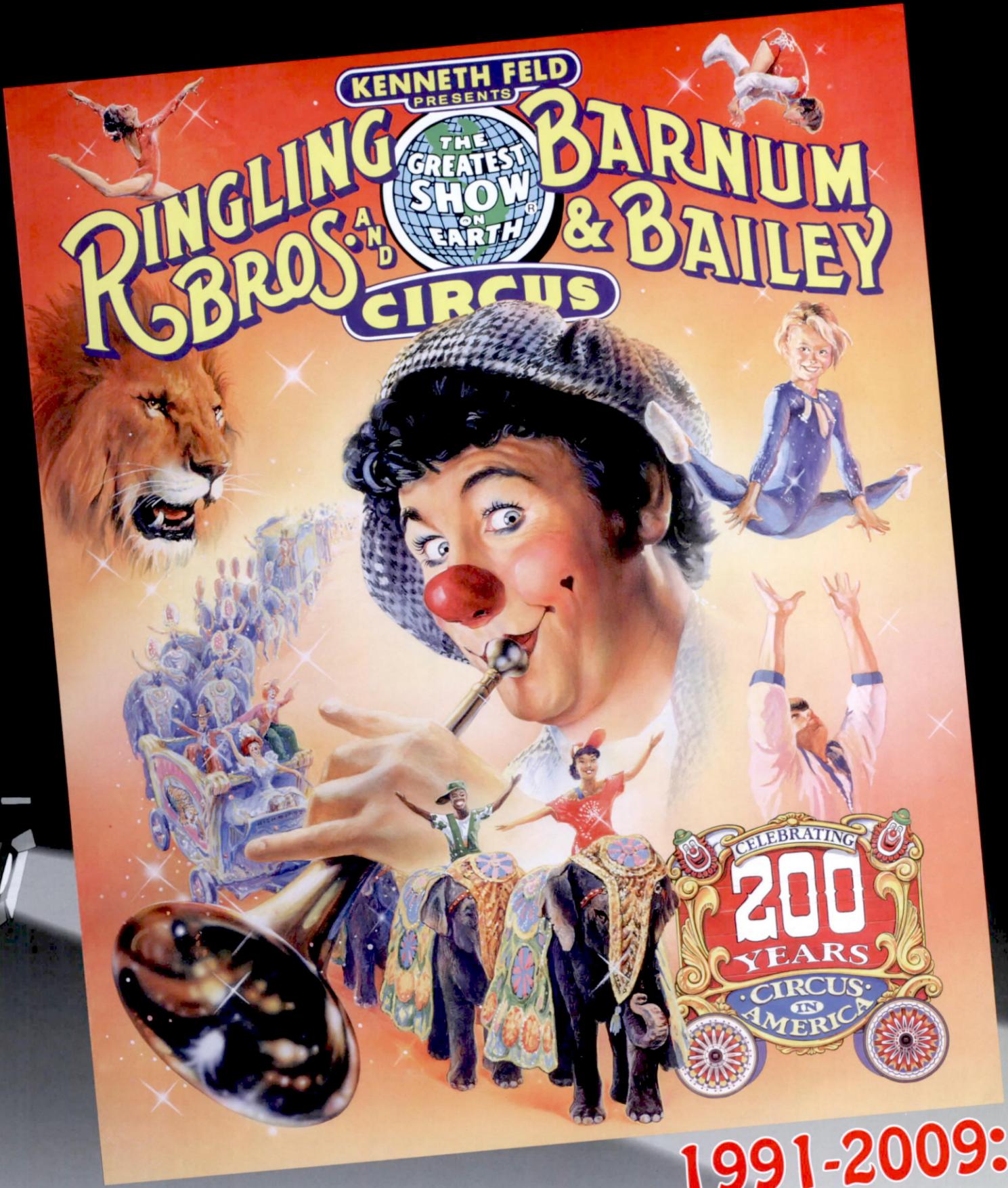
said to Tammen: "What were the receipts today?"

"Darned if I know," he exclaimed. "I don't care whether we made a cent or not. Just being with that kid at his first circus was reward enough for me."

Onward, from Marshfield to a fight with an escaped lion at Medford, and the threat of a forest fire at Weed, California. On to Riverside, California, where the poles fell and killed four of our men. On to Yuma, Arizona, with the mercury at 112 degrees, and an afternoon show only, that we might make a long, hard run to

that one of them must die. So we settled down to watch the giant cockfight, and to hope for a speedy ending. It came in one tremendous kick of the victor. He actually beheaded his rival by that kick. The duel was over and the show went on—an hour late.

**T**HREE puffing engines strove their best to make up time—then, far in the night, stopped in the midst of the desert. Far ahead the sky was red from the glare of the burning train. A spark from the engine had settled in a side-



1991-2009:  
**Ringling's "Mini-Era"**

RINGLING  
BROS. AND  
BARNUM & BAILEY

THE GREATEST  
SHOW  
ON EARTH®

PRESENTS  
*Belloboration*™



A Hair-Raising Circus ~~Bello~~ Celebration!  
of the Headliner Clown

by Rodney A. Huey, Ph.D.

All images in this article from the Ringling Museum

The moment the clown stepped from the European stage into the riding ring of Philip Astley's (1742-1814) equestrian show that opened on the outskirts of London in 1768, the clown had found its new permanent home. From antiquity through today, the clown has been ever-present in the human experience, as much a cultural figure as a comical entertainer. Early fools, mountebanks, charlatans, court jesters, stage clowns, zannis, Lords of Misrule, Puck, Touchstone, Harlequin, Pulcinella, Joeys, and perhaps even Br'er Rabbit have all answered in one form or another to the name of Clown. Indeed, as Kimberly Christen argued, the clown is "among the most widespread character types in mythology and popular culture throughout the world."<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the long and colorful history of the clown a few key transformations occurred that lay the groundwork for today's modern circus clown. The carnival fool, or Lord of Misrule, whereby the village idiot was elevated to a dubious king during the pre-Lent celebration, gave substance to the idea that power structures could be questioned officially in a sanctioned moment of resistance. The court jester that flourished throughout Europe during Elizabethan times and beyond brought official recognition of this accepted fool "who took advantage of his free license as a buffoon to engage in satirical comments on the state of affairs" from inside the Royal court itself.<sup>2</sup>

But it is commonly accepted among historians that the half-masked characters of the *commedia dell'arte* that performed throughout Italy in the 1500s and 1600s formalized the clown figure as a consistent, costumed and standardized comical character that taunted high society through parody and satire. Pulcinella, Pantalone, Capitano and others became "stock characters" whose roles were more or less established through the character, but who were given *ad lib* license to perform their mischief on stage. The *commedia dell'arte* trope even had its own clown character, or zanni, who played the role of the lowly servant.

Then British actor Joseph Grimaldi (1778–1837) created a stage character he called simply Clown in London's Covent Garden in 1800. With a motley costume, a red triangle on each cheek, bushy eyebrows, and a cockspur wig, Grimaldi's Clown has been described as "half-rascal, half-fool, he is criminal and innocent at once, an ancient of days and a guttersnipe."<sup>3</sup> Grimaldi earned the informal title of

*On the previous two pages are posters of David Larible in the 1993 Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, 123<sup>rd</sup> Edition and Bello Nock in the 2007 Bellobration, the 137<sup>th</sup> Edition.*

Both images from the Ringling Museum. Use courtesy of Feld Entertainment

the "father of clowning" and his Clown set the prototype for the "auguste" character.

A quarter-century later Frenchman Jean-Gaspard Deburau (1776–1846) introduced Pierrot, a French adaptation of *commedia*'s Pedrolino, as a sophisticated, yet lovesick romantic who employed subtle gestures, wit and wry humor as opposed to the aggressive physical comedy of Grimaldi's Clown. Pierrot wore an all-white costume with puffy sleeves and a ruffled collar, complemented by white facial makeup with fine accents around the eyes and mouth, and established a model for today's whiteface clown.

The clown character, in any performance format, always played a meaningful, integral role as spoiler to the serious intent, bringing comic release to the drama, and at times even that of a central figure. Indeed, when Astley inserted Fortunelly, history's first circus clown, as a comical rope dancer into his equestrian show to break the



Joseph Grimaldi as Clown

tension of the dynamic riding stunts, the clown was given equal stage presence as the strongman and acrobats who built human pyramids. Not only had Astley fused together the three elements that defined the traditional circus for the next 200 years—performing animals, acrobatics and clowning—theatrically speaking, his clown presented the mask of comedy as a counterbalance to the dramatic mask of the serious and often dangerous acts.

In the United States, it was a Scotsman named John Bill Ricketts (1760-ca 1800) who presented what is commonly accepted as America's first circus performance in Philadelphia in 1793. An adaption of Astley's circus, Ricketts show presented trick riding, acrobats and a clown named McDonald, also an import from Europe who performed "a row of flip-flaps with his feet tied together."<sup>4</sup> He was later replaced by a Mr. Sully who was promoted as "a tumbler and singer at Sadler's Wells Theatre in London,"<sup>5</sup> and in 1795 Ricketts hired American-born stage actor John Du-

rang (1768-1822) who purportedly had to hone his riding skills to perform comedy on horseback. Echoes of the *commedia*'s strong comical influence stretched across time and the Atlantic Ocean, because Durang also played Pantaloons to Ricketts' Harlequin in a skit entitled *Harlequin in Philadelphia*.<sup>6</sup>

During the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, clowns were mainstays in the traveling combined circus/manegerie that spread to the hinterlands, aided by the innovation of the circus tent. By the 1830s, the clown stepped forward into the spotlight as a singing clown, and became so popular that clowns began to receive top billing to rival equestrians and other circus performers. Among the more prominent were Irishman Johnny Patterson, who also sang on Tony Pastor's stage in New York City; Thomas Barry, the "Hibernian Jester;" and Peter Conklin, described by one historian as "one of the greatest singing clowns that the world of sawdust and spangles has ever produced."<sup>7</sup>



Pete Conklin and R. Hunting with the Sells Bros. Circus in 1880

To supplement their salaries, singing clowns sold songbooks, called songsters, at the end of each show. Songsters became so popular that circus owners began selling “songster privileges” to singing clowns, taking their cut of the profits. Conklin boasted in his post-Civil War memoirs of using a shill posed as a Civil War veteran to sell his songsters to sympathetic circus-goers, and purportedly sold 100,000 copies in one season. The shill posed as either a Confederate and Union soldier depending on which side of the Mason-Dixon Line the show was appearing.<sup>8</sup>

At about the same time, the talking clown began to emerge, as exemplified by Dan Rice, circus owner and performer who biographer David Carlyon dubbed “the most famous man you never heard of.”<sup>9</sup> Rice is also credited as singlehandedly giving circus clowning a distinctive American style. The penultimate “talking clown,” Rice was more of a political satirist and orator than a physical clown. Known for his sharp tongue and quick wit, Rice would spout ribald and bawdy parodies of Shakespearean verse, banter with the audience and level barbs at political figures of the day. He earned \$1000 a week and purportedly counted President Abraham Lincoln, Zachary Taylor, and Robert E. Lee among his acquaintances.<sup>10</sup> Rice, costumed in striped pants, tails, a stovepipe hat, and goatee, was described by one chronicler as “the closest thing America has had to an embodiment of Uncle Sam”<sup>11</sup> and as “democracy’s first jester” by another.<sup>12</sup>

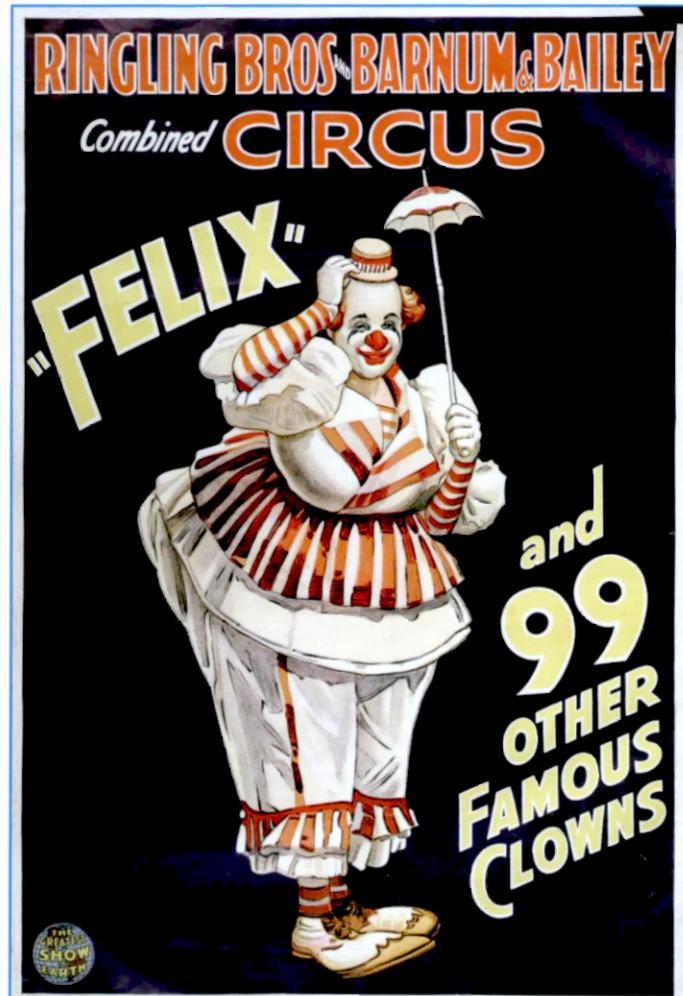
By the end of the Civil War, the talking and singing clowns were the front and center performers in the American circus with the other acts revolving around these central figures. But then came the Industrial Revolution and the creation of the multi-ringed, railroad circus, and all that changed.

The massive economic, social and cultural changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution that kick-started America’s Gilded Age had a tremendous impact on every aspect of life as it was known at that time. The United States was breaking out of its shell as an agrarian society and transforming itself into a modernizing, urban-based, technological society with corporate business as its core. Oddly enough, these transformations trickled down to the circus clown in ways that neither Dan Rice nor Peter Conklin could have ever imagined.

Nowhere else did America’s new class of entrepreneurs express itself more aggressively than in the circus. Dan Castello and William Coup (who brought master huckster P.T. Barnum into the circus business), James A. Bailey, Adam Forepaugh, the Sells brothers, and of course, the Ringling

brothers are among a handful of circus owners who literally forged a new entertainment industry out of a loosely formed confederation of small traveling circuses. Collectively these men brought about significant changes within the circus operations that mirrored the changes that were taking place in the emerging corporate world. Historian Janet Davis argued that the changes brought about in the Gilded Age “helped destabilize an older, provincial way of life” and paved the way for the expansion of the circus into the changing American cultural landscape.<sup>13</sup>

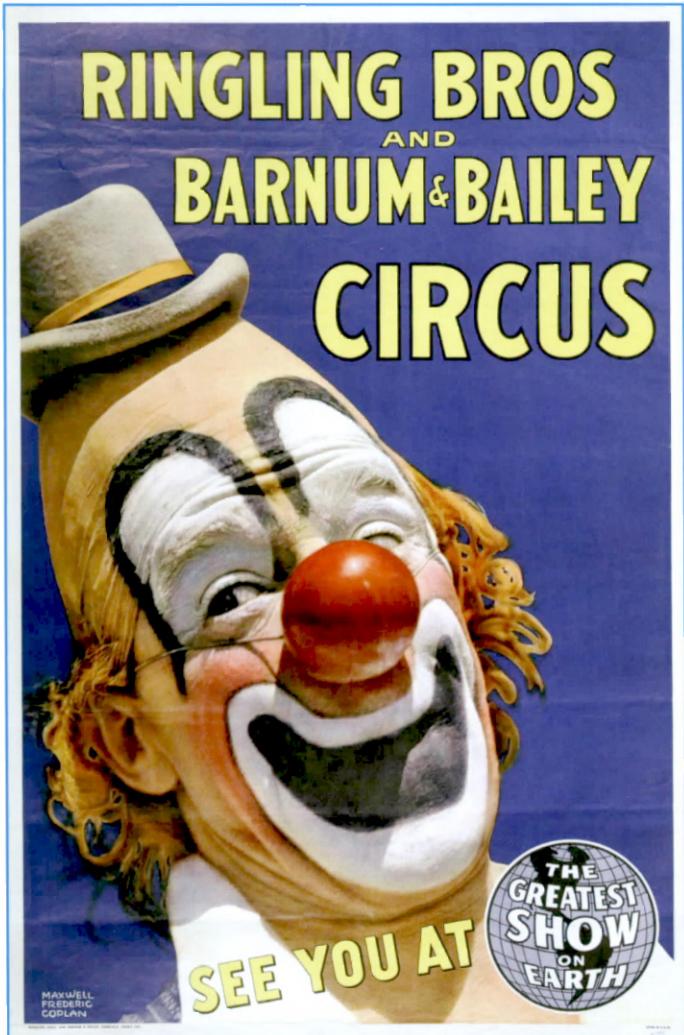
First and foremost was putting the traveling circus on rails that increased its mobility almost geometrically. The circus on rails could travel as far in one day as any overland troupe could move in a month, thus introducing the circus to new markets far and wide. Secondly, innovations in printing technology and communications allowed the circus to adopt new marketing techniques, such as colorful circus heralds. Finally, the performance space under the big top tent was greatly expanded to accommodate larger



*Ringling poster circa 1933*

audiences, and of course, generate larger profits for circus owners. Barnum's circus added a second ring in 1873 and a third ring in 1881 to create not only the largest performance space under one tent, but also introduced new terms into the common lexicon—the “three-ring circus” with its accompanying “hippodrome” track.

With new space to fill, circus owners were pressed to locate and secure new acts, never-before-seen oddities and larger collections of exotic animals, and produce more magnificent production spectacles, all of which brought about two significant changes to the performance of the circus clown. First, the three-ring format greatly increased the need for more clowns. Secondly, the singing and talking clowns, such as Peter Conklin and Dan Rice respectively, could no longer be heard in the top row of the bleachers, so the clowns had to rely on more vibrant and outlandish costumes, physical comedy and visual gags to entertain circus-goers.



*Ringling poster circa 1950*

Step-out clowns, such as Frank “Slivers” Oakley (1871–1916) who performed with Barnum & Bailey circus after the turn of the century, could command the attention of even a three-ring audience with his one-man baseball game that covered the entire circus floor. But his routine did little to fill the empty spaces within and around the circus rings. So shortly after the Ringling brothers purchased Barnum & Bailey in 1907, the same year that Oakley left the show, Al Ringling, owner and original Ringling Bros. clown, issued an edict to clown alley that “there would be no principal clown” in the show, other than himself, of course.<sup>14</sup> Ringling’s decree officially spelled the end of the individual clown and relegated the once center-ring clown to the hippodrome track—a position that Ringling clowns, and most other three-ring clowns by proxy, would hold throughout most of the twentieth century.

Circuses began to tout their clown ensembles in posters and advertisements. They acquired “armies of clowns ...participating in mass routines and gags,”<sup>15</sup> and at times it appeared that circuses promoted its “colorful brigades of loony pranksters and suave misfits” as much as its star attractions and grand spectacles.<sup>16</sup> A Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey edition in 1930s boasted of “more than one hundred clowns” in its clown alley, a bit of an exaggeration perhaps, but nonetheless would easily qualify as a “horde” of clowns.

This downward mobility of the clown resulted in a less-individualized and more homogenized and marginalized clown with conforming costumes, makeup, and even routine gags, such as the firehouse gag or Keystone Kops. But from within these ranks of the proletariat clown emerged a handful of talented funsters who begin to turn their faces once again toward the spotlight. Among them were Felix Adler (1898-1960), billed as the “King of Clowns” but better known as the “White House Clown” due to his multiple trips to perform at the White House; the cone-headed Lou Jacobs (1903-1992), German immigrant and contortionist-turned-clown who performed with the Ringling show for more than 60 years, mentored actor Jimmy Stewart for his Buttons the Clown role in Cecile B. DeMille’s *The Greatest Show on Earth* movie and had his iconic image memorialized forever on a U.S. postage stamp in 1966; Otto Griebling (1896-1972), former acrobatic rider who with Emmett Kelly popularized the “tramp” or “hobo” clown image; and Emmett Kelly (1899-1979) himself who arguably became the most popular circus clown in America and turned to Hollywood and television to promote his clowning style.

Although we now look back fondly on these self-made,

self-actualized clowns who gained popularity through innovation, talent, and sheer moxie, history is probably kinder to them than reality. It is true that each of these masters eventually managed to gain a modicum of celebrity and even individual ring gags. But they were possibly more valuable as marketing vehicles, as “loss leaders” rather than star attractions. While few would recognize Felix Adler, Lou Jacobs, or Otto Griebling by name, their iconic faces were recognized widely among both circus-goers and non-fans. But make no mistake, while their popularity may have remained high, none were ever billed as star attractions, and they certainly were never rewarded financially like the trapeze flyers or animal trainers. Within the corporate hierarchy of the Ringling organization, they remained just members, albeit revered members, of clown alley—and, of course, valuable marketing tools.

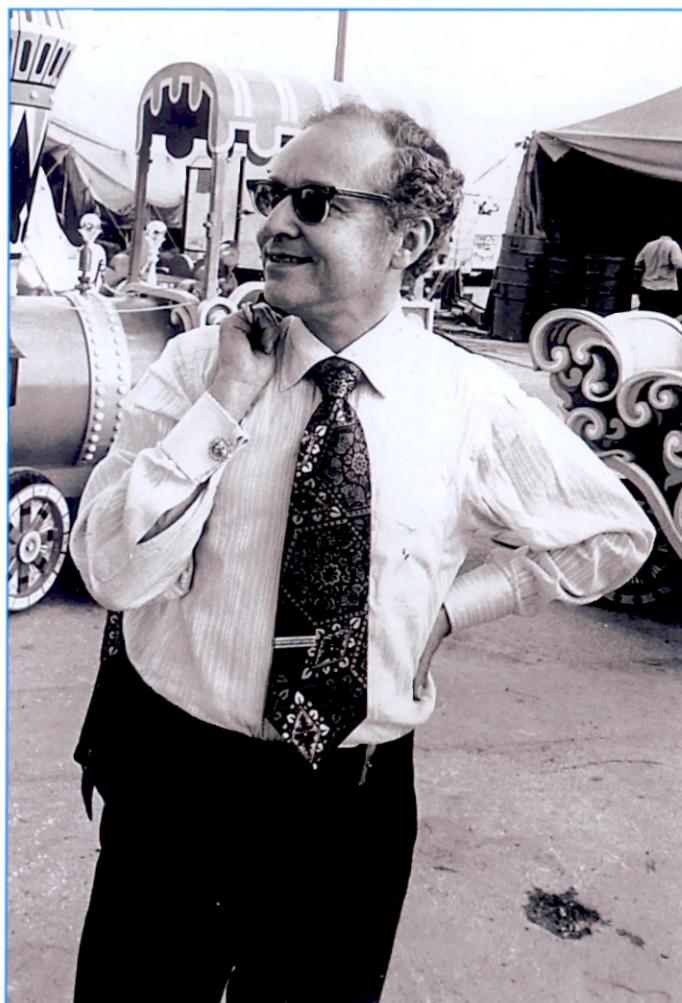
Ringling Bros. and other major American circuses fell on hard times in the mid-1950s due to declining ticket sales, labor disputes, scarcity of circus grounds caused by the post-World War II suburbanization movement and the advent of television in the American living room. On July 16, 1956, Ringling folded its big top tent for the last time in Pittsburgh, marking the apparent death of the traveling tented American circus. But rock ‘n’ roll promoter Irvin Feld (1918-1984) stepped in and began booking the legendary circus into the modern arenas that were springing up around the country, and within a decade had arguably returned Ringling to its former greatness and popularity. Feld and two business partners bought Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus in 1967, and his first move was to create a second traveling unit to double his earning potential. He bought the entire German Circus Williams to gain the talents of a young animal trainer named Gunther Gebel (1934-2001)—whom Feld would eventually market and promote as “the greatest animal trainer of all time.” But in keeping with the European tradition, Circus Williams had only one or two clowns as opposed to the clown brigades in American circuses.

Feld needed clowns, and he needed them so badly that he created Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Clown College in 1968 as a training facility for young clowning neophytes. In thirty consecutive annual sessions, Clown College matriculated almost 1,300 graduates trained in such skills as stilt-walking, juggling, makeup, costuming, prop building, and pie-throwing.

Clown College’s avowed mission was to revive the traditional art of clowning and to help students discover and develop their own “inner clowns.” But in reality, Clown

College primarily replenished the clown alleys on both units with from 12 to 15 “first of Mays” annually, and their personas, costumes and routines were more suited to the show’s production numbers than to individual artistic expression.

Then in 1990, a strange thing happened. Ringling’s Vice President of Talent Tim Holst (1947-2005) reminded owner and producer Kenneth Feld about a vibrant Italian clown they had seen in Europe named David Larible and who Holst thought had the ability and performance acumen to hold the attention of an entire audience by himself. Feld dispatched Holst and a marketing team to observe Larible who was performing a short stint with the Circo Atayde Hermanos in Tijuana, Mexico. Executive Vice President Allen Bloom (1936-2008), Corporate Communications Vice President Susannah Smith, national public relations representative Julian Reed, national publicist Barbara Pflughaupt and this author traveled to San Diego for a border crossing into Tijuana to watch Larible perform.



*Irvin Feld on the show lot in 1972*

Impressed with Larible's performance, they reported their findings back to Feld, who then challenged the group to determine if Larible could entertain 15,000 people in an arena as well as he could in a small, one-ringed Mexican circus.

Portland, Oregon was selected as the test city, and Larible was inserted into the show for the week-long engagement. Little did the unsuspecting Oregonians know that they were part of the world's largest circus focus group, nor did the Feld marketing team expect that audiences would become so enraptured with Larible's performance. Convinced, Feld signed Larible to a multi-year contract as the new star of the 1991 Red Unit of The Greatest Show on Earth, calling his decision "a big gamble" and "a turning point at Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey."<sup>17</sup> With a stroke of the pen, Larible became the first headliner clown in Ringling's 121-year history while at the same time stepping into a spotlight beam vacated by the retiring Gunther Gebel-Williams.

As part of his headliner deal, Larible got a full railroad

car for his family, contracts for his aerialist sister Vivian and other family members, and a clause in his contract that guaranteed his image would be the largest on every billboard, poster and advertisement—amenities previously reserved only for legendary circus stars. Ringling also produced a line of dolls and toys made in Larible's image, another clowning first. The marketing team promoted Larible as the "Prince of Clowns" hoping to get some European flair into the mix, and spared little expense on creating a two-year national campaign that would replace Gebel-Williams' image with that of David Larible.

Larible's clowning persona was unlike that of the typical American circus clown. He wore an over-sized, black and white checked herringbone suit, floppy shoes, a whimsical Jackie Coogan-style cap and minimum facial makeup featuring small accents around his eyes and mouth, highlighted with a small red bulbous nose. His signature routines were neither subtle nor slapstick. Rather his "shtick" was pulling people (and shills) from the audience as foils for his comical hijinks.

Larible's talent as an international solo clown was affirmed in 1997 when he won the Golden Lion award at Wu Quiao Festival in the People's Republic of China, and again in 1999 when he won the coveted Golden Clown award at the Festival International du Cirque de Monte-Carlo in Monaco. But talent and "shtick" notwithstanding, Larible's in-ring performance was not as much of an affront to both of Ringling's clown alleys (all of whom were Clown College graduates) as was his very presence and star billing. More than a few questioned why Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey would have invested millions of dollars and 30 years to creating a new generation of circus clowns only to recruit a European clown as the show's unquestioned star.

Larible's performance continued to gain credence among American audiences as his recognition and popularity increased. He performed with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey for four consecutive two-year tours, then in 1999, Feld pulled yet another circus surprise when he created a one-ringed tented show based on the European circus model. Feld moved Larible from the Red Unit to help create and star in the new Barnum's Kaleidoscope [sic], the circus' first one-ring venture since Barnum added a second ring in 1873. Feld recruited French clown Phillip Sosman, Jr. as a classic whitefaced Pipo figure in contrast with Larible's more auguste look. Directed by Italian artist Raffaele de Ritis, the show was built around the European circus model, including a foyer tent whereby fans could meet and mingle with performers before the show, and where



David Larible

the performers bid *adieu* to departing audience members and posed for photographs after the show. Larible and Pipo provided the running gag throughout the entire production that featured aerialists, acrobats, a crossbow act, and even a vaudeville-like musical quartet.

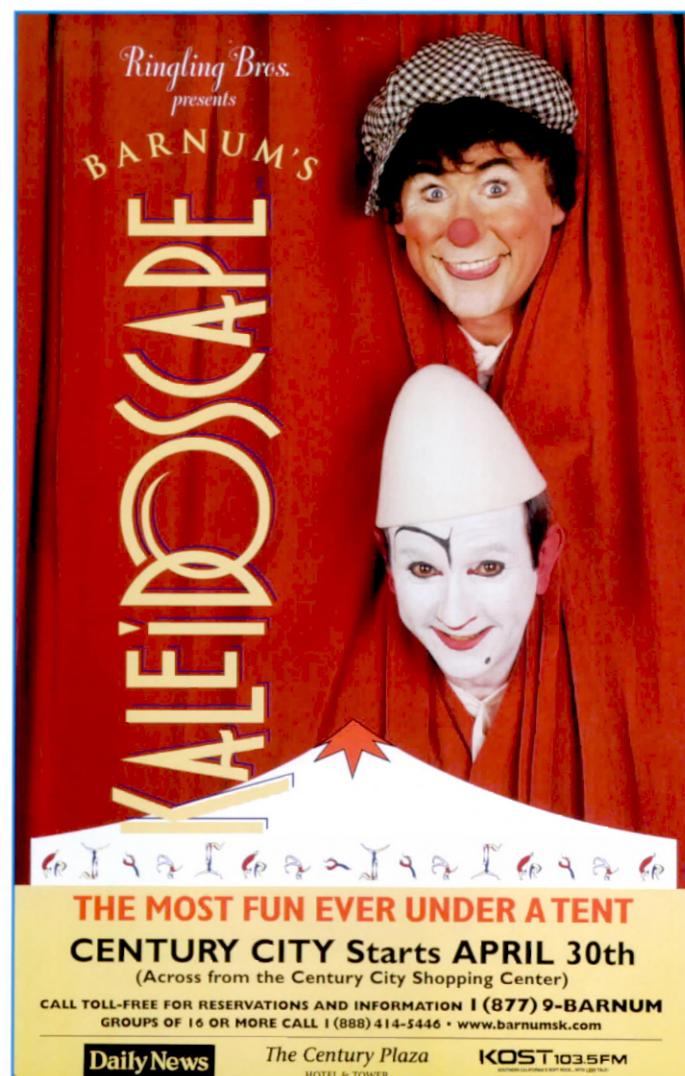
Barnum's Kaleidoscope played 14 cities from early 1999 through its December, 2000 engagement in New York City's Bryant Park where it went head-to-head with the Big Apple Circus playing at its coveted site, the Lincoln Center. The media billed the dual appearances as a "circus war" which only generated more ticket sales for both shows. The show received rave reviews, as evidenced by *New York Post* critic Clive Barnes' proclamation that Barnum's Kaleidoscope was "the kind of show for which God built the circus" and referred to Larible as "a master clown fit to rank with the best of the past."<sup>18</sup>

A theatrical hit but a financial disappointment, Barnum's Kaleidoscope closed on December 31, 2000 to end both the New York City engagement and its nearly two-year tenure. The show's last publicity gig was Larible being interviewed live on television by Dick Clark in Times Square minutes before the ball fell to ring in 2001. The New Year's Eve closing of the show did not, however, bring an end to Ringling's headliner clown, because at the same time that Kaleidoscope was literally folding its canvas tent for the last time in New York City, Ringling's 131<sup>st</sup> edition was opening in Tampa, Florida with another headliner clown—American-born Bello Nock.

A member of a famed Swiss circus family, Nock, who was also not a Clown College graduate, was a self-taught clown and comic daredevil. His routines were extremely physical, such as comical trampoline, motorcycle high wire, wheel of steel and a sway pole act. Like Larible and opposed to the Ringling rank and file members of clown alley, Nock wore minimal facial makeup. His costume was a tuxedo knock-off with a bright red bow tie and always accompanied by one red sock and one yellow sock. But Nock's signature characteristic was his brilliant red hair that was combed up in a full 8-inch cockspur – *a la* animated cartoon character Johnny Bravo. In fact, Nock's persona, costuming and body language was more reminiscent of a live cartoon action figure than a circus clown in the traditional sense, and also like Larible before him, Ringling offered a Bello doll and cockspur wig in its concession line. Nock had been the star of the 2000 Big Apple Circus edition entitled "Bello and Friends," so his image was already recognizable to New Yorkers. During his first year with Ringling, he was dubbed "America's Best Clown" by *Time* magazine.<sup>19</sup>

After a year of decompression, rest and individual clowning appearances in Europe, Larible returned as the headliner in the 132<sup>nd</sup> edition of The Greatest Show on Earth in 2002, where he remained through the 2005 season. So from 2002 through 2005, for the first time ever, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey fielded two circus units with headliner clowns—Larible on the Blue Unit and Nock on the Red Unit. It is also interesting to note that in 2002 the Big Apple Circus also featured three clowns with shared headliner billing—Barry "Grandma" Lubin, Dick Monday and his clowning wife Tiffany Riley, the first female headliner clown in the Big Apple Circus' then 24-year history. As a note of irony, Lubin was a Clown College graduate and Monday was its last dean in 1996-97!

Nock continued with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey for four two-year tours, expanding his repertoire of daredevil displays and gaining popularity and recognition,



A poster for Barnum's Kaleidoscope

so much so that the 2007 edition was named “Bellobration,” marking the first time in its 140-year history that a Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey edition was named for an individual performer, much less a comic artist. Nock left Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey at the end of the 2008 season.

Clown College graduate Tom Dougherty stepped into the Ringling spotlight for the 2008-09 seasons on Ringling’s Blue Unit. But David Larible and Bello Nock are hard acts to follow. A talented performer, Dougherty held his own as a solo artist, but Ringling’s shift from its traditional three-ring format to a more-or-less “ringless” performance space with a dark rubber matting floor did not help project Dougherty’s subtle movements and persona. Moreover, his black leotard pants and tuxedo jacket with tails set a sharp contrast to the more flamboyant antics, colorfully accented costumes and bigger-than-life personalities of Lar-

ible and Nock. At the end of Dougherty’s two-year stint, his contract was not renewed. When the presidium curtains closed on the last performance of Ringling’s 2009 season, the mini-era of the Ringling headliner clown came to an abrupt end.

The idea of a single clown as headliner of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey was definitely an historic anomaly, so much so that *Wall Street Journal* reporter Kelly Crow wrote an investigative piece in 2005 about the circus’ new “celebrity clown,” arguing that under the pressure of live-action television shows and negative exposure from animal rights protests, circuses were “trying to transform these once-nameless sideline acts into major brands.”<sup>20</sup>

For the headliner clowns themselves, star status certainly boosted their individual careers and international marketability. After David Larible left Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey in 2005, he moved back to Europe to join Germany’s Circus Roncalli as its “undisputed star” where he created new clowning entrees with his brother-in-law Bernhard Paul (aka Zippo the clown) and clown Gensi Mestres. In addition to his annual stint with Roncalli, Larible makes regular cameo appearances with other circuses, including the Swiss Circus Knie, Budapest’s Fövárosi Nagycirkusz and Circus Carré in Amsterdam. In 2007 he was awarded the Grock Trophy of Imperia and two years later performed at Villa Grock on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the famed Swiss clown’s death. He has performed with the Berlin Philharmonic and was a guest artist in the 2015 Bolshoi Circus production *Like*. Larible returned to the United States in 2013 to star in a short tour of Cirque Musica produced by former Ringling promoter Stephen Cook. He also developed one-man theatrical shows “Destino di Clown” and “Il Clown dei Clown” with pianist Stephan Kunz, and he is spotted regularly as a circus celebrity of sorts at numerous circus festivals around Europe.<sup>21</sup>

Following his Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey performance career, Bello Nock performed a short stint in Europe before starring in the “Bello Comes Home” edition of Circus Sarasota in 2009. Later that year he walked a high wire above the Lincoln Center in New York City to publicly announce his return to the Big Apple Circus as headliner of the “Bello is Back” edition. Promoting himself primarily as a comic daredevil (with little or no facial makeup), he earned a spot in the *Guinness Book of World Records* in 2010 by completing “the greatest distance for an unsupported tightrope walk” aboard a cruise ship in the Bahamas. Nock won the Golden Clown Award at the Festival International du Cirque de Monte-Carlo in 2011 and produced and



Bello Nock

starred in *Bello Mania* at the New Victory Theatre in New York City in 2013, earning a Drama Desk award nomination. He also performed with the Rainbow Circus at the Universal Studios theme park in Japan in a production that earned the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions' Brass Ring Award as "Best Show." He announced his intention to attempt *The Ultimate*—15 stunts in 15 minutes – live on ABC-TV's Good Morning America, and then set another world record for conducting media interviews for eight hours while sitting atop a high wire. To date, *The Ultimate*, originally scheduled for June, 2014, has yet to come to fruition.<sup>22</sup>

Tom Dougherty teamed with Spanish clown Pepe Silva in 2010 and together made their first European appearance by winning the Prix d'Image award at the International Circus Festival of Albacete in Spain, and then landed a contract with France's Cirque Arlette Gruss for the 2012 season. They have also performed at the International Circus Festival in Budapest, Teatro Price in Madrid and most recently with the Circus Kronebau in Munich in 2015.<sup>23</sup>

Today, if there are any doubts that the Ringling clowns have slipped back into the footlights, attending any performance of the two circus units will put an end to them. Brightly costumed and well-made-up, the contemporary Ringling clown warms up the audience in the pre-show festivities and come-in, performs in highly choreographed ring ensemble gags and participates in production numbers. There are few, if any, walk-around or track gags in the ring-less setting, no step-out clown or solo clown acts and definitely no headliner clown.

So why did Kenneth Feld take such a daring move in 1991 to counter a century-old practice of keeping the marginalized clown in the footlights by moving him into the spotlight? That is a ponderable question, and one in which no one really knows the answer except Feld himself.

However, speculation is that he was always searching for some "never-before-seen" features for his shows, and a headliner clown would definitely fit into that category. Another guess is that he needed to fill a huge hole created by the departure of Gunther Gebel-Williams, which sounds closer to the real purpose. Or perhaps, as often happens with major shifts within the circus, it was just serendipitous happenstance. However, very little in Kenneth Feld's professional career has been the result of sheer happenstance.

Regardless of the reason, the two decades of headliner Ringling clowns introduced American audiences to new clowning looks, talents and performance styles. It also generated unfettered laughter and joy from countless cir-

cus-goers. But one thing is certain: the Ringling headliner clowns from 1991-2009 perpetuated the spotlight/footlight/spotlight/footlight cycle of one of America's most cherished cultural and entertainment figures—the circus clown. **BW**

*Rodney Huey is a strategic communications advisor to the Fédération Mondiale du Cirque, under the patronage of H.S.H. Princess Stephanie of Monaco. He has served as a consultant to the Ringling Circus Museum in Sarasota, Florida, and was vice president of public relations for Feld Entertainment, Inc. from 1992-2002, parent company of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus. He also worked as vice president for communication at NPR. He earned his doctorate in cultural studies from George Mason University and wrote his dissertation on Clown College. He has taught both as an adjunct and full-time faculty member at various universities, including American University, George Mason University, Lynchburg College, University of Virginia's BIS Program and on two voyages of Semester at Sea. In 2004 he established RAH PR Strategies, a communications consulting service. He and his wife Susanne live in Bethany Beach, Delaware.*



Poster for the 2003 Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey 133<sup>rd</sup> Edition

## Endnotes:

1. Kimberly Christen, *Clowns and Tricksters: An Encyclopedia of Tradition and Culture* (Sam Gill, Consulting Editor. Denver: ABC-CLIO, 1998), p. ix.
2. John Towsen, *Clowns* (New York: Hawthorne Books, Inc., 1976), pp. 26-27.
3. Richard Findlater, *Grimaldi: King of Clowns* (London, MacGibbon & Kee, 1955), p. 10.
4. George Spaight, *A History of the Circus* (London: The Tantivy Press, 1980), pp. 112, 115.
5. Beryl Hugill, *Bring on the Clowns* (London: David & Charles, 1980), p. 146.
6. *The Constitutional Diary and Philadelphia Evening Advertiser* (Dec. 12, 1799), p. 2.
7. Robert J. Loeffler, "Biographies of Some of the Early Singing Clowns," *Bandwagon*, Vol. 13, No. 5, Sept.-Oct. 1969, 20.
8. Loeffler, "Biographies," p. 19.
9. David Carlyon, *Dan Rice: The Most Famous Man You've Never Heard Of* (New York: Public Affairs, 2001).
10. LaVahn G. Hoh and William H. Rough, *Step Right Up! The Adventures of Circus in America* (White Hall, VA: Betterway Publications, 1990), p. 65.
11. Carlyon, p. 411.
12. John Culhane, *The American Circus: An Illustrated History* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1990), p. 49.
13. Janet M. Davis, *The Circus Age: Culture & Society Under the American Big Top* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), p. 7.
14. Arthur Borella, "Why Circus Clowning Lags," *The Billboard*, Dec. 1, 1934, p. 35.
15. Hoh and Rough, p. 199.
16. David Hammarstrom, *Behind the Big Top* (South Brunswick: A. S. Barnes and Co., 1980), p. 218.
17. Interview with Kenneth Feld as reported by Rita Braver, correspondent, *CBS Sunday Morning* (June 19, 2005).
18. Clive Barnes, "Escape to Family-Friendly 'Kaleidoscope,'" *New York Post* (November 24, 2000).
19. *Time* (July 2, 2001).
20. Kelly Crow, "The Power Clown," *Wall Street Journal* (August 12, 2005), p. W1.
21. For complete David Larible biographies, see his website at <http://www.davidlarible.it/davidlaribleenglish/Biography/Biography.html> and Circo-

pedia's entry written by Italian producer Raffaele de Ritis at [http://www.circopedia.org/David\\_Larible](http://www.circopedia.org/David_Larible).

22. For complete Bello Nock biography, see Wikipedia at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bello\\_Nock](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bello_Nock).

23. For complete Tom Dougherty biography, see his website at <http://www.tomandpepe.com/> and Circopedia's entry written by Dominique Jando at [http://www.circopedia.org/Tom\\_Dougherty](http://www.circopedia.org/Tom_Dougherty).

Use of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey images courtesy of Feld Entertainment, Inc. Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey and The Greatest Show On Earth are owned and used by permission of Ringling Bros.-Barnum & Bailey Combined Shows, Inc.



Bello Nock performs with *The Greatest Show on Earth*.



NEW HAVEN, CONN.— JUNE 13<sup>TH</sup> 1934

photo courtesy of The Ringling Museum